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WESTBOUND TANKS



Sen. Sergeant F. P. Podkriko, Gunner of a Heavy Tank.

WESTBOUND TANKS

by

A. POLYAKOV

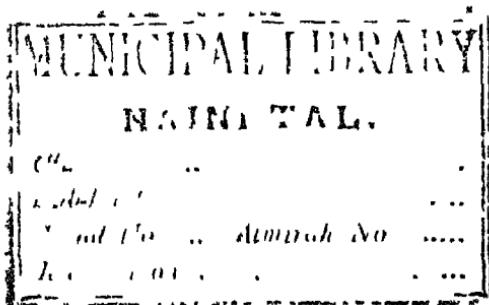
Author of
"With a Soviet Unit through the Nazi Lines"

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WESTBOUND TANKS

CHAPTER I

AN EVACUATED TANK FACTORY

THE giant factory stretches out over dozens of miles—so huge that the eye cannot take it all in, so vast that a horse would drop before he had galloped halfway round its perimeter. Hundreds of chimneys, large and small, rear up to the sky, tossing their long black-and-white manes of smoke high in the air. Here, on those dark-grey mornings when the temperature averages 40 degrees Centigrade, the hot breath of the factory, which comes snorting through these chimneys, is felt as a sudden warm blast. The air resounds with a steady mechanical roar—the pulse of this industrial Hercules, born of the Stalinist Five Year Plans.

The life and work of the factory goes on day and night. It knows no fatigue, takes no days off, keeps no holidays. It is not merely working but fighting. It fights like the whole of our country, the whole of our people.

"Do you suppose our sons in the firing line have any days off?" I heard one of the older factory workers say this casually in the course of conversation. It summed up the need for enlisting all forces to help the front.

Evacuated to the far recesses of our hinterland, using an already existing plant in the Urals as its base, the factory has settled down to renewed and increased activity. Some of the workers remained at the old site and are defending it to this day. The rest—several thousand of them—were put on board planes and flown here. They came to the Urals to make tanks, the most powerful tanks there are, armour-plated mobile fortresses for the Red Army. They became the talk of the whole Urals district.

The war cannot wait. It demands arms and machinery and, above all, planes and tanks. What the Urals produced at the beginning of the war cannot now satisfy the demands of the front under any circumstances. No one knew this better than the newly-arrived contingent of workers who had frequently worked on their tanks during raids by Nazi bombers and seen how production suffered.

On the first day of his arrival, the director of the plant looked the men up and down.

"And who's going to prevent you from getting out a man's size quota here?" he said sternly.

The front must get as many tanks as it calls for. This was the condition put by the newcomers to their fellow workers in the Urals.

This was the slogan of our embattled country. And it was this slogan that inaugurated the ardent friendship and collaboration between the evacuated and the local workers engaged on heavy tank production.

Orders were sent to every corner of the Urals. The giant Magnitogorsk plant was harnessed to the task. The graphs of pig iron and steel smeltings began to curve upward. The manufacture of armour plate increased. Orders for the tank factory were treated as the orders of the whole country to ensure victory against the Nazis.

The first day I went over the factory I met groups of foremen and workers who had come from the Tank Delivery Department. This is the last department of all where the final assembly, adjustment, trial run and delivery of the finished product to the Red Army take place. When the gates are opened the finished tanks have a straight road ahead of them—from the cement incline to the station platform and thence to the front.

I asked the men from the delivery department if they were there as visitors.

"The other departments are behind the delivery department," a middle-aged worker answered indignantly. "They're holding us up, and that means holding up the front. We've got to put some pep into them. We're visitors if you like, but mighty particular ones!"

In one shop the delivery brigade walked straight into a department meeting and made the laggards feel ashamed of themselves. In another they lent a hand themselves with the job. The very next day after this "raids," tank production showed a considerable spurt.

The Assembly and Delivery Department is the most imposing of all the new departments added to the plant. It is a real tank factory all by itself. Beneath its tall vaults enter long trains loaded with parts ready for assembly; powerful stationary cranes are suspended from the lofty ceiling while travelling cranes nose their way along their corniced tracks.

Gently swaying in the air, the skeletons of future tanks weighing several tons each, turrets, guns and motors are safely conveyed to their respective destinations. Amidst the din of welding and riveting, and after much assembling and testing, a tank is born. It is picked up like an infant by the factory's most powerful crane and dangles in the air while girls cover it with a nice coat of snow-white paint, its swaddling clothes, so to speak; then the new-born tank is added to the factory's numerous progeny. Testers drive it to the tank-drome, put it through a high-speed test, make it spin around like a whirligig on one spot, overcome obstacles and get down into pits. Its guns and machine-guns are tried out on the range. The young tank grows to man's estate, and becomes a powerful fighting machine capable of succeeding in any venture, ready to bring glory to those who begot it and those who drive it into battle.

The superintendent of the Delivery Department is an old worker named Alexei Volkov. Small and slight, with a pointed face covered with oil, he looks boldly into the world with his restless, clear grey eyes. Before and during the present Patriotic War he has

received several Government awards for his excellent record in filling important war orders. He has been rearing Soviet tanks for eleven years and was the first to assemble the powerful 'K.V.s'—named after Klim Voroshilov.

The whole world knows these armour-clad fortresses, the flagships of our tank fleet, which roar into battle flying the Red Flag of victory.

In the winter of 1939 'K.V.' tanks were shipped to Finland to smash the White Guards. Volkov and his labour brigade left for the front. At the front they acted as a tank crew. Ignatiev, Kovsh and Lyashko, driver-mechanics, were at the wheel during the fighting. Istratov, an engineering expert, and Volkov himself looked after repairs.

Now this same group of five was working with Volkov in his shop. Ignatiev and Istratov as chief foremen; Lyashko and Kovsh as brigade leaders. All have been decorated for their conspicuous services—Istratov three times.

The people working here are distinguished for the scrupulous way in which they tackle their own jobs and those of others. 'Workers' captiousness' is Volkov's expression for it. 'Measure off seven times, then cut off once,' is the maxim of every worker at the bench. All realize that one worker, by failing to finish off a part with the requisite precision, can reduce the efforts of a thousand other tank builders to naught. If a tank stalls on the battlefield, not only is it all up with the crew but it may mean the failure of the entire operation and the loss of countless lives.

Volkov does not mince his words when he lands on a worker who has turned out a defective part. He doesn't stop to explain in detail the dire consequences of carelessness. He simply lets fly.

"Are you working for the Germans?" I heard him say to one young worker who had been guilty of gross negligence. The boy, for he was hardly more than that, hung his head. I thought he was going to burst into tears.

"I'd rather have you take it out of my pay, Alexei Semyonovich," he pleaded. "I'll work a whole day for nothing. Only don't use those words; they kill me."

Volkov let him off with a strict injunction 'not to let any more junk pass.'

A remarkable feature of the workers as a whole, in Volkov's shop and in the others, was the front line atmosphere. Workers, engineers and technicians had been landed like airborne troops ready for a major military operation. They had to work from twelve to sixteen hours a day. People like Volkov and his immediate assistants and advisers hardly ever left the factory grounds for months at a stretch. These conditions of work still prevail to this day. The situation demands arms and tanks in abundance if we are to achieve victory at the front.

Last autumn the same five headed by Volkov organized a repair brigade and went off to the front line zone near Leningrad to fix up

tanks that had been hit. Once again, as before in Finland, Volkov insisted on going into action.

To-day the implacable hatred of this old tank builder and of all the evacuated workers for the German invaders finds expression in the manufacture of the greatest possible number of tanks. Here, far in the rear, there is also a front, a front that is forging the means of victory. Stalin demands that all should work with unflagging effort and "supply the front with more and more tanks, anti-tank rifles and guns, airplanes, cannon, mortars, machine-guns, rifles and ammunition . . .".

Each day the evacuated workers together with the native sons of the Urals translate this order into action. Each day the number of tanks produced increases. Last month the output was less than to-day, and at the end of this month it will far exceed present production.

CHAPTER II

MORE OF THE 'MAMMOTIS'

THE day came when the namesake of the heavy tank factory, Klimenti Voroshilov, arrived at the plant. The marshal had been commissioned by Stalin to examine the process of production of the machines, ascertain what assistance was required and ask the workers and engineers of the factory to increase their output to the utmost, for tanks were to-day the surest guarantee of victory over the Nazi hordes and their 'invincible' technical equipment.

When Marshal Voroshilov arrived at the Assembly Department he at once started talking to some of the workers. But the entire department were eager to have a chat with the marshal. They all flocked around him in a sort of general interview.

"How are things at the front?"

"What's the latest news from Leningrad?"

Questions were showered at the First Marshal of the Republic by the factory force. Soon the whole department had thronged around him.

A finished tank was improvised as a platform. Klim Voroshilov in person mounted on a 'K.V.'

The Marshal had himself been a Lugansk mechanic. Now he was addressing men of his own former profession. He spoke of how victory over the Hitlerites could be won, how the Nazi vipers could be crushed and an end put to their invasion of the Soviet Union. Surveying the huge room that was now hushed in silence, Voroshilov said:

"Comrades, the People's Commissar of Defence, Stalin, says that if we are to achieve final victory over the enemy we must overcome

his superiority in tanks and planes. You are engaged in the production of tanks, and of heavy tanks at that. This means that victory is largely up to you. This means that it depends on you whether the hour of settling accounts with the enemy shall be brought near or long delayed. This is the reason why Joseph Stalin, People's Commissar of Defence, asked me to tell you that the front expects to receive from you more and more tanks, and all of the excellent quality that they possess now."

Then, amidst loud applause and bursts of approving laughter, Voroshilov went on to tell how horror-stricken the Nazis were at the sight of our 'K.V.s.'

"The Hitlerites called them Soviet 'Mammoths'; so let us have more of these Soviet 'Mammoths'! Let them wok their trunks into the Nazi scum of the earth; let them give it to them as they deserve, wrench them loose and hurl them out of the land of the Soviets."

There was an interesting encounter in the engine department. Voroshilov walked between the rows of lathes; he stopped beside an old worker dressed in a blue jacket with measuring instruments protruding from his big pockets, who stood out among the rest for his stern features and huge black moustache.

"Listen, friend; aren't you Khudyakov?" Voroshilov said.

"That's me all right, Klimcnti Yefremovich!"

"Some whiskers! How did you get here?"

"As you see we are making tank engines. We've been evacuated."

During the civil war Khudyakov had served for a long time as a partisan in Voroshilov's detachment. And now the two recalled how once when surrounded by the Whites they had managed to shoot their way out. "And now there's war again and everybody has to step lively," said Voroshilov.

"Suits me all right," said Khudyakov, "but if only we were over there, nearer to the front."

"Nothing doing about the front for you, old 'un. None of that now. Haven't you got a front right here?"

"True enough. But I should like to get a feel of those blasted Germans."

"Nothing doing. There are younger ones than you for that. Let them get a feel of them. I bet you've got someone at the front yourself."

"Why, of course, my son Vassili is there."

"What's he doing?"

"He's in a 'K.V.'"

"So what business have you, old whiskers, to be there? Let the father make tanks and the son fight in them. You are a grand old man all right."

The factory is a fortress of defence. It forges victory at the front because it is a front itself. Although a thousand miles away from the firing line, it feels the pulse of the entire mighty organism of our embattled country. Every blow struck by the enemy fills the hearts

of its workers with grief. But they muster new strength, strain brain and sinew to the utmost, set their jaws more firmly and continue at their jobs, turning out more and better stuff. Blow for blow. To-day's output must exceed yesterday's. This makes itself felt at the front. This is something which our brothers, husbands and sons at the front can feel. They will be grateful to us just as we are grateful to them.

Over one of the machines in the grinding department I noticed a little red flag with the inscription 'For Stakhanovite Work.' At this lathe stood a round-faced girl with a red handkerchief over her head from under which little tight curls peeped out. She wore a pair of small mother-of-pearl earrings shaped like lyres. The girl was going through the usual motions of operating levers. From the swift grindstone that was finishing off some part there came a constant jet of sparks. Each day she handles more than a hundred such parts, every one of which demands the most accurate and painstaking work.

"That's Anya Martyanova," the foreman told me. "She's a local Stakhanovite worker. Her schedule calls for the production of twenty-four parts a day, but she gets out a hundred of them; earns about nine hundred roubles a month."

During the break I spoke to Martyanova. She is very lively and rather voluble. Her husband is at the front, a gunner.

"To-day is a holiday for me," she said, smiling radiantly and sharing her joy with me. "Yesterday I got a letter from my husband. I hadn't heard from him for over three months."

"So you are celebrating and tackling all this heap of work at the same time? You sure must be busy?"

"And how!" said Anya merrily. "He needn't think they're the only ones who are fighting. He boasts that they've been awarded a Guards Banner. Well, we in our department also expect to get a banner, an honorary red banner, at the end of the month. We're Guardsmen too."

Everyone in the works is straining eagerly to win the coveted award. The general atmosphere is one of zest and zeal. Day and night the wheels keep on humming. Often the workers do several shifts at a stretch. They consider themselves as soldiers at the front who have been assigned the task of capturing an important height so that the Red Flag can be hoisted at its highest peak.

It is characteristic that in this battle of production both those who have just had good news from someone near and dear to them at the front, and those who have already been bereaved by the cruel war forced upon us by the Nazis participate with equal energy and intensity.

A friend of Martyanova's, Vera Kurdyuk, who works in the same shift, has recently been informed that her husband, a young lieutenant, had been killed. She was grief-stricken at this loss, but plucked up her courage and is now firmly holding her own. Her work has not been impaired. She remains a Stakhanovite just as she was before, and her excellent production record is the best vengeance she can take on the Nazis who are responsible for the death of her husband. More and more tank parts! More and more Soviet mammoths

This will hasten the day of vengeance, the day of triumph over the enemy of our Fatherland, the enemy of our people.

A tank factory in war-time is not simply a place of production but a second line at the front deploying for participation in the general offensive. If one takes into account the strength of the bonds, the ties of intimacy that link this second line with the front line units, one may rest assured that their joint victory is not far off.

Khudyakov, the foreman, and his son Vassili, the tankman, as well as Martanova, the brigade leader, and her husband Nikolai, the gunner, will not fail each other. They will work for each other, come to the rescue of each other. But more and more tanks, more and more Soviet mammoths, is the paramount need of the hour!

Working conditions at the tank factory are not much to rave over. Never mind that now. True it is a long time since the workers have been to a theatre or a cinema or heard a concert except over the radio. But everyone who on leaving the factory sees a line of finished tanks, his own handiwork, driving off to be tested at the tankdrome, experiences a thrill of excitement, a genuine spiritual elation. The mere sight of these moving fortresses of steel causes one to forget all the hardships of war-time.

To-day the irresistible endeavour to provide the front with the greatest possible number of these fortresses consumes all the energies of the workers at the tank factory. Theatres and cinemas will come with victory. As far as music is concerned, it seems as if Anya Martanova is willing to content herself with her lyre-shaped mother-of-pearl earrings. To her they recall not only music, but also her husband who gave them to her. If only we produce more tanks, more Soviet mammoths, then good times will come again!

Everyone, large and small, from the youngsters attending the technical schools, many of whom were born on the eve of the first Five Year Plan period, to the old-timers who form the backbone of the factory staff, is imbued with fighting spirit, impelled to heroic action by revolutionary enthusiasm.

Kostya Vladec, a twelve-year-old learner at a technical school, with a painstaking expression on his young face, his lower lip pushed forward in fierce concentration, diligently keeps cutting bolts for tanks. He doesn't know himself where they go but when I ask him: "Are you also making tanks?" he answers with an air of decision: "Of course, what do you think?" Turning the bolt over in his hands, he says: "When this piece of metal is bounced against the head of one of the Nazis there will be nothing left of him but a grease spot."

Meanwhile the foreman of the neighbouring department goes from bench to bench, imparting instruction to the young workers who have only recently arrived at the factory. He is an elderly man with a bristling white beard and spectacles. At the age of sixty-seven, during the present Patriotic War, he was awarded the Order of the Red Banner for his excellent work for his country's defence. I ask him if he has heard about our latest successes at the front.

"Yes that's how it ought to be You didn't think they were

going to crush our mother country, Russia? She is such a powerful one. All that is needed now is to make a real effort. The Germans sure did brag about their fine equipment and their powerful tanks, but we too are a people of iron, a people of steel. Have you seen the beauties we are getting out?"

The eyes of the old foreman fairly burned as he spoke of those mighty juggernauts which are called Soviet mammoths in the latest German dictionaries.

CHAPTER III

A GENERAL OF THE TANK INDUSTRY

EVERYBODY here calls him the "Master." Depending on the occasion, this title is pronounced with tender warmth, boisterous enthusiasm or in a cautious whisper, but always with deep respect.

"I heard the Master's given some new instructions for our department," Kondryatiev from the foundry told his mate.

"Our Master has a head on him. He has taken every man here firmly in hand. I saw how many wild buffaloes were tearing down the track at the tankdrome to-day. We never got them out in such droves before."

This was how the workers talked on their way to the factory as they encountered a contingent of tanks about to be tried out.

"The Master was going to tick us off. He warned us last time that if we didn't finish our assignment he'd drive us out of the factory. Some people were threatened with even worse," one shift foreman told his chief.

At a defence plant in war-time the word 'master' conveys omnipotence. No need to explain the specific meaning and content of the word under Socialist economy. Any assiduous, conscientious Soviet business executive may be taken as an example of what is meant by 'master' in the U.S.S.R.

The 'master' at the head of this Soviet tank factory is a short square man in drill overalls with the trouser ends tucked into his boots. His breast is decorated with the gold medal that denotes 'Hero of Socialist Labour.' He is a military type *par excellence*, nothing short of a general. Only his collar, without any badges, betrays the civilian.

His face is energetic, youthful and clean-shaven. In some respects it is more reminiscent of tender adolescence than of a mature man who has experienced life. Straight, well-shaped nose; grey, darting eyes; fair hair with grey patches at the temples. He is long past thirty but his face still shines with the energy of youth. When he speaks his voice glows with energy. Its tones are high, sharp and distinct.

"The main thing now is to gain time, to get ahead of the Germans despite the industry of German-occupied Europe. We must gain both quantitative and qualitative superiority in tanks. The Germans were bragging abroad that they had demolished and destroyed the Soviet factories, but now they are already becoming convinced of how serious and dangerous the output of the 'destroyed' factories really is."

The director then spoke of the necessary intensity and enthusiasm which each one of the thousands of workers and office employees at the factory must evince in order to win the fight for the fulfilment of the task that Stalin had assigned. He knew by heart the names of dozens of outstanding foremen and workers at the factory and ticked off on his fingers all tank parts of which a stock was already accumulating in the various departments and which ensured the supply for weeks and months ahead.

The director's ardent temperament, which shows itself in his every word and movement, makes everyone present feel as if he were himself some part of a tank and that the director was fitting this part in its place with his own hands.

'Morning' in the director's vocabulary has reference to a certain indefinite, unspecified time during the course of twenty-four hours. It might coincide with the astronomical morning, but it could also be twelve midnight or 3 a.m.

He starts the day in the 'morning' by making the round of the factory. This takes up several hours. At what end and with what department he will begin is never known to anyone except the responsible official on duty that day. Everywhere he is sure of an affectionate welcome by the workers with whom he has made friends in the course of years. He inquires about every detail, ascertains what is lacking and who is holding up the work. Those who have earned praise are promised premiums, but he can also administer a severe rap over the knuckles to anyone who deserves it.

Once he saw a worker at a bench with a bandaged hand.

"What happened?"

"Oh, it's just a bit painful."

"How's that? Did you get it caught in the machine?"

"No, it's an abscess."

"Let's have a look at your hand. How did you get that abscess?"

The director drew the huge dirt-encrusted paw toward him.

"Snakes alive, boy; don't you ever wash your hands?" he exclaimed. "You're as filthy as a pig. That's where this sore comes from. I hope you don't suppose this will be counted as an accident!"

In Department No. 2 the director called all the foremen together for the conference which had been agreed upon the day before.

When all were seated round the department superintendent's table, the director asked the foreman sitting farthest away from him to tell him how many parts he was delivering, who was holding him up and whom he himself was holding up.

The foreman reported that while he was behind schedule on some parts, he was ahead on others and that on the whole he was doing his job.

"That may be true to-day, all right; but to-morrow I'll be increasing your scheduled output and then you'll be behind, and you'll say that on the whole you're not doing your job. You're no longer accumulating a stock. And yet you're a smart chap. You ought to be able to knock out more."

Another foreman complained that he needed a certain work bench without which he could not fulfil his quota. At the same time he hinted that a friend of his at a neighbouring factory had told him that they had many of these benches that were not working full time.

The director jotted this down in his memorandum book and promised to get him that bench.

The next foreman, who had been decorated with the Red Banner, described what a hard time he was having with one part. Five workers were engaged in its production and all five of them were down with 'flu.

"And you're running around wringing your hands in despair, not knowing what to do. And you aren't even ashamed of yourself?" the director interrupted. "Why not ask all the other foremen whether they haven't got a man that's worked on this part before."

"I did, but they won't release them."

"We'll see about that," said the director and together with the assembled heads of departments and shops he went over the list of working personnel. Five workers with the necessary experience were found and temporarily transferred to the shop that had fallen behind its programme.

The foreman who spoke last began with the following tale of woe: "I'm up to schedule on the main parts, but as for the rest deliveries are irregular . . ."

The director interrupted him bluntly, asking with a sarcastic smile: "I suppose a tank consists only of main parts, doesn't it? And the non-main parts? What about them? I demand complete fulfilment of the production programme on all parts. And don't you come along again with such gab. You'll never get a tank moving from the spot with your policy of main and non-main parts."

The director then told the foremen that he was introducing a new schedule right away calling for increased production. In the interests of the salvation of the fatherland this intensified programme must be carried out like an order from the commander-in-chief to his subordinates. No one must stint his efforts. "We must work not only eleven but twelve and even fourteen hours a day if necessary to increase the output of tanks with every day. As soon as the department as a whole has fulfilled my new programme for ten consecutive days, I'll give each foreman a bonus of a month's salary and will assign a substantial fund for bonuses for the workers."

The foremen solemnly pledged themselves to see that the plan would be carried out. Then a Stal'novite worker who had been

invited to attend the conference, told about his output of the night before. This was exactly the quantity required under the director's new programme.

A council of war was being held in the director's office. Directors of allied factories and combination plants, both local and evacuated, had gathered to hold a conference on questions of common interest. The conference included representatives of the metallurgical, steel rolling, ordnance, engine, chemical, and electrical industries—all producers contributing to the manufacture of tanks.

This was quite an awe-inspiring assembly—a meeting of the tank industry's general staff. Those taking part in it were the generals of the industry. They had command over divisions and regiments of workers and engineering and technical staffs. Just as at military headquarters at the front so here they worked out a plan for their most important operations. New inventions and new machines mean new production processes.

Seated at the head of the table with his staff on either side of him was the factory director. The Chief of the Designs Department, like a major-general of technical forces, had been awarded the title of Hero of Socialist Labour. There was the head Designer, the First Assistant Executive of Tank Construction and others of similar importance. All of them, the whole staff and all their troops, all their mental and physical efforts, were equally subject to the orders of Stalin, the supreme commander-in-chief, as the men fighting at the front.

The director expounded to the conference his militant programme of action, a programme that originated with the supreme commander-in-chief, upon whom the fate of our country and of our people depends.

Stiff demands were made of the allied factories whose products were essential to the manufacture of tanks. Those of them which had not yet made full use of their production capacities were sharply hauled over the coals. A number of instances of truly heroic work by evacuated as well as local plants were cited. After this the director found it necessary to hold up to general ridicule, with the straightforwardness and frankness inherent in his nature, the director of one of the smaller evacuated works.

"Just look at Enkin, this feudal baron, sitting here if you please," he said. "On his arrival here he ensconced himself in state. He won't let anyone, including myself, get near him and there is very little production to be got out of him. I ask you now, Enkin, will you give me at least your small parts and in the quantities that I require? I know you like to talk a lot and do damn all. It seems you've got away with it so far because you have the gift of gab, but you won't get away with it any longer. What we need now is deeds not words. When you are fully coping with your job I'll be the first to thank you and acknowledge your efficiency. And I'll tell you like a friend that in view of your predilection for oratory I shall, after the war, of course, arrange a special meeting for your sake of all

those present here. I shall give you the floor, put two carafes of water on the table and let you spout for an hour, and no one shall dare to interrupt you."

None of the industrial executives present envied Enkin his position. The public censure he had received was fully deserved.

Inasmuch as the factory is producing for the army, a group of highly-trained military engineers and tank commanders are attached to the staff. Many of them come straight from the front. The director carefully considers their advice, makes note of their suggestions for the further improvement of the tanks, and accompanies them to the tankdrome and the range to attend the testing of machines and their armaments. His best consultants and assistants in this respect are Second-Class Military Engineers Shpitanov, Kaulin, Fedoseyev, and Poklonova, and Colonel Yevdokimov.

At the factory I also met Tatyana Mikhailovna Frunze, the daughter of the famous Red Army general. She is a junior military technician working in the factory's laboratory. "As you see, she's also doing her bit making tanks, and forging victory at the front," the director said.

Tanya's round face and erect, neat little military figure immediately reminded me of her famous father. Frunze always had a victory psychology. This firm belief in victory has become the fortunate inheritance of his daughter whose radiant face betrays the same indomitable spirit.

And every one of us joins Tanya in the firm hope and unshakable belief in ultimate victory over the enemy of our country!

CHAPTER IV

TANK INSTRUCTION CENTRE

IN the immediate neighbourhood of the plant where tanks are made and sent off, there is another combination of establishments—the Tank Instruction Centre, where tank crews are trained and sent off.

The Tank Centre trains entire units and crews, accustomed to team work among themselves—trains them for the very same machines that emerge in full harness from the gates of the tank factory. When a tank is ready for delivery and has stood every scrutinizing test, a carefully instructed and fully tested crew is likewise ready to take charge of it. It is particularly important that the crews should receive part of their training at the factory itself and in their own future machines in which they will go into battle. The convenient nearness of the training grounds to the factory makes this fully possible.

Ten days before graduation and departure for the front, the crews

of each battalion are attached to their respective 'boxes,' as the armoured-plated chassis of their future land-ships are called. From that moment on the whole life of the crew centres literally around these 'boxes.'

The commander of the tank-to-be, the driver, the gunner, the mechanic and the radio operator all live only for, in, and around this steel carcase. They join the groups of workers engaged in equipping the machine inside and outside. The machine is put on rollers, and is fitted with its tracks and a bristling row of artillery and machine-guns. Inside it they install the engine, the transmission, the radio set, the optical instruments and all the other innumerable fittings.

The crew take charge of their tank when it is still wholly incapable of locomotion, a mere mass of armour plate.

Each day the machine is more and more fully equipped, becomes more interesting, more life-like, as it were. Soon it will be fully alive, its powerful engine will begin to hum, its headlights to flash, its horn to scream a warning to the workers on the factory grounds to look out and step aside.

A group of powerful 'K.V.' tanks were making for the exit. They formed a unit by themselves, under the command of a twenty-three-year-old lieutenant Astakhov—a tall athletic young man with a long, determined-looking face, straight nose, and an intriguing smile in his eyes. Astakhov had already been at the front in command of a unit. He was wounded once. Now he was about to return to the front.

I had known Astakhov and his men for several days and watched their constant, painstaking work assembling their tanks together with the factory hands.

To-day the tank crew did not look at all like yesterday's grimy and oily factory workers emerging from time to time from the black belly of the unfinished tank. Now they were clean and spruce, wearing brand new overalls. Both men and machine were ready to undergo their final test.

The factory is one of the schoolrooms of the Tank Centre, the artillery range is another, the tankdrome a third, while a fourth class is afforded by the open land and forest for a hundred miles around which is used for tactical instruction.

The Tank Centre has no indoor classes with a blackboard and a bell to announce the recess. This is not the time when six months or a whole year can be spent looking at coloured illustrations of tank parts. Instead of pictures real tanks and parts are used. But the main thing is that those who receive instruction at the Tank Centre are experienced tankmen who have been kept in reserve. Only not so long ago they bore different names—names such as combine operator, tractor driver and chauffeur.

Second Class Military Engineer Novotortsev, formerly senior tester of military machines at a plant producing tanks, is now senior

instructor on tanks and their operation at the Tank Centrc. He and Major Shevazudsky, the senior artillery instructor, are inseparable.

"We're going to be partners to-day, Fedor Petrovich," said Novotorsev to Shevazudsky, as they sat at the breakfast table.

"Oh yes? Well we'll see how your drivers bang their tanks against the corners of the houses on the way to the range," the major grinned.

"You mean we'll see how your gunners blaze away in every direction except the target," said Novotorsev. "I'm going to get quite a kick out of that."

"I don't doubt that even you will get a kick out of watching some really accurate shooting," said the major.

Jokes about the impending 'partnership' exercises went on throughout breakfast. In the tank instructors' jargon 'partnership exercises' are combined exercises of the entire crew involving shooting and driving simultaneously.

The Astakhov 'K.V.' quintette headed for the tankdrome. The other four tanks were commanded by Lieutenants Chilikin, Kalinichev and Efimov and Junior Lieutenant Gomozov. It was a clear frosty morning. The sun on the blinding white snow was dazzling to the eyes while 45 degrees of frost nipped the skin. A duel with Jack Frost presents no particular difficulties to a tank crew, if the machine is in perfect trim and each member of the crew does his job properly. The engine gives off heat steadily and rhythmically, the gun is always ready to discharge heat; and the crew themselves are a source of it. Everything here burns and flames. More fire, more energy from men and machines! Then no frost need be feared. The Germans will get plenty to weep and wail about from us. We'll give them alternate doses of heat from our tanks and cold from our Russian winter.

The huge steel mammoths lumbered along the main street of the plant, shaking the buildings and pressing heavily on the snow. Without so much as brushing against a single corner they arrived safe and sound at the tankdrome. This was intersected by several ditches, a stream and an oak spinney. A row of wedges, protruding slightly above the deep snow, showed like a faint dotted line on its surface. The commander of the route battalion, Captain Glushkov, together with Novotorsev and Shevazudsky, assigned Astakhov the following tactical and firearm exercise: "Execute a frontal attack on a strongly fortified 'enemy' defence line and overwhelm his tanks and artillery with gunfire and tank tracks."

Having taken up their initial positions, the tanks moved forward and dashed at the 'enemy.' The massive wedges scrunched under the tracks like lumps of sugar in a set of strong teeth. The anti-tank pits were passed. Now the tanks had to make the steep snow-covered edge of a ditch. All five machines crossed over the ditch and plunged at the opposite side, but then they either slipped back or else spun helplessly round on the frozen surface of the slope.

A few more impetuous starts, but all in vain. The attack proved a failure.

"That's what you call tankmen, and in 'K.V.s' at that?" roared Engineer Novotortsev as he pounded the air with his fists and ordered the crews to get out of their machines. "You call yourselves mechanics," he shouted turning to the drivers. "Why, you act as if you were leading a dog on a string instead of driving a powerful tank."

The crews stood silent with downcast eyes, casting sideway glances at the confounded edge of the ditch. They had made a mess of it, thinking that the ditch was soft and could be approached as in the summer, whereas in fact it was hard as granite.

"Here, I'll show you how to tackle it," said Novotortsev, and he climbed up into the nearest tank.

The machine began to clatter along. The crews stood looking on. Twice Novotortsev drove the tank alongside the ditch. Then he made a determined dash across it. On the opposite side the tank at first skidded and spun around; as if frightened by the precipitous bank, even began to slide back. Then it took a sharp turn to the right, followed by another turn to the left and negotiated the slope by bold zigzags. It was already roaring along the far side when Novotortsev's head and shoulders emerged from the hatch. He was still pounding away with his fists. He shouted something and jabbed with his right hand at the course he had traversed. Then he disappeared back into the driver's seat.

When he came back to the crews, Novotortsev said he would show them one more way of taking a steep ascent at a run. "Over there is a line of obstacles and bushes and just across the stream there are some trees. You thought you'd get stuck at the trees and wouldn't make the bank. You haven't fully sized up the power of your machines yet."

Novotortsev drove the tank towards the opposite bank where the ground was covered with undergrowth. He headed straight for a steep stretch of bank where there was a solitary tree, its roots barely managing to hold on to the ground. He roared forward head on at such a speed that I had hardly time to see the tank strike the tree right at the roots so that it crashed over on the tank, tearing a huge clod of soil out of the bank. This hole served as a convenient step for the tank to scramble up and over the top. "Attaboy!" said the tank crews in genuine admiration.

In an hour's time all five tanks had obediently repeated Novotortsev's performance.

The gunners' marksmanship was tested at night, much to the delight of Major Shevazudsky, who had complained that Novotortsev had dragged out the driving tests. Shooting at night is a science that smacks very much of front line conditions.

The artillery and machine-gun practice went off well. Many accurate hits were scored both on the run and during short stops. This was not to be wondered at in view of the fact that four out of the five crews had already seen active service during the present war.

The target practice was a splendid success for all the five crews. The plywood targets were smashed to shreds and scattered to the four winds. "That's what we'll do to the Fritzes," the crews said slapping the gunners on the back.

Tanya Frunze had come with us to the tankdrome. She was a firm friend of the tankmen. Every successful manœuvre roused her admiration. The crews loved to see her standing there, and were proud of displaying their skill in front of her.

Late at night the crews returned to their battalion. Koftun, the cook, had waited up to serve us a hot meal. The battalion commissar, Senior Political Instructor Lukasz, a tall man with an intelligent face and bushy eyebrows, came out to meet us. He himself was only just back from practice exercises carried out by another unit. He took keen interest in all the details of our day's work.

Everybody went into the Lenin Room, whose spacious quarters were a convenient resting place. Here the tank crews loved to talk among themselves, or browse through newspapers and magazines.

"We are trying to make 'em all like these fellows," said Lukasz, pointing to a newspaper cutting, one of several which had been neatly pasted to a notice board. It described the heroic exploits of a certain 'K.V.' tank crew consisting of Lieutenant Bakanov, driver Shabalin, gunner Vershinin, radio operator Sivkov and mechanic Vokhlov. This crew, in the first engagement in which it took part, had accounted for seventeen enemy guns, several dozen of dugouts and about a hundred German tommy gunners and infantrymen.

"Those boys are from our own battalion," said the commissar with an air of satisfaction.

CHAPTER V

THE ARMOUR-PLATE EXPRESS

LIEUTENANT ASTAKHOV's five tank crews stepped smartly into line on the station platform in front of the large open train. The engine already had steam up.

Facing the faultlessly dressed files of the tank crews were the workers and engineers of the factory likewise smartly lined up. Amongst them were the foremen and leaders of the teams which had assembled, fitted and tested the tanks. Here were assembled all those who had had a hand in creating these giant tanks and training their crews. The director of the factory was engaged in a lively conversation with the chief of the Tank Instruction Centre. Old man Khudyakov was sedately stroking his luxuriant moustache. There was Tatyana Frunze with her ready smile, the practical-nuanced Novotortsev and Shevazudsky and many others.

The senior foreman made his official report: "After duly testing it I have turned over the tank made by our factory in perfect fighting condition!"

"I have duly accepted the tank in perfect fighting condition!" snapped Astakhov, the commander of the first tank, who was also in command of the whole group of five.

The same formalities were observed in the delivery and acceptance of the other four tanks. Then the director of the factory addressed a few valedictory words to the tankmen:

"The workers of our factories have stinted neither brain nor brawn to produce these wonderful machines," he said. "In turning them over to you, we call on you tankmen to use them well, to ram, crush and shoot to hell the hated Nazi vipers. Free our towns and villages and ensure the complete victory of our country! We have also a special request to make of you: Give the Germans a double dose when you get near the city that the whole country loves so well—Leningrad!"

Astakhov replied on behalf of the tankmen: "Everything will be done just as you ask. We promise to fight in these tanks, ready to sacrifice life and limb. We'll smite the fascists in Stalin fashion!"

The director then went up to Astakhov and embraced him heartily. For quite a while they held each other in this truly symbolic embrace—two tankmen *par excellence*: the director of the tank factory and the commander of the five tanks. And it seemed to me then that those who had embraced and pledged their word to fight it out to a finish were not only the director and Astakhov, but the whole of our toiling people and its loyal sons, the men of the heroic Red Army.

There then took place the general leave-taking from friends and relatives.

Lieutenant Astakhov walked over to his wife, who had been modestly standing a little way off. She was of average height with a good figure; her dress was simple but smart, finished off with a fur collar. She had been most self-effacing during the ceremonies that were now ended. Astakhov had introduced me to her the previous evening. She was dark-skinned with a pair of hazel-brown eyes full of frankness and a rather childish *naïveté*. Her slightly pouting lips were beautifully shaped and dark curls peeped out from her white beret. The young couple had only been married a year and a half. She had recently passed out from a nurses' training school.

Standing here beside the train that in a few minutes was to carry away the one that was dearest to her, was almost too much for Lena. When her husband tenderly put his arm round her shoulder she gave way for a moment. Her eyelashes glistened with tears and she hastily fumbled in her bag for her handkerchief. It dropped on the snow and Astakhov bent down to pick it up, giving Lena time to hide her little nose and tear-filled eyes in the high collar of her overcoat.

"Now, darling, you know this won't do," said Astakhov purposely adopting a loud facetious twang.

But she continued to hide her eyes.

"Cheer up, Lena darling," Astakhov said tenderly. "You know, you can't fill your petrol tank with tears no matter how hot they are, as our tankmen would say."

"All aboard!"

No sooner was the warning command given than the express started to move. The silhouettes of the people left on the platform became fainter and fainter in the dusk. Soon the fluttering hand-kerchief of Lena Astakhov disappeared from sight, and only the tall factory chimneys continued to wave their long sleeves of smoke as if they wanted to accompany the train to the front itself.

Already railway stations were flying past, so quickly that often the eye could not catch their names. The train sped on like an arrow. It covered an average of over six hundred miles a day. The telegraph poles flew by so rapidly that they created the image of a coars-toothed comb. The powerful engine only stopped to take in water. For a few minutes he stood, snorting like a fire-breathing monster, sucking up a whole tender-full of water. Then he was off again on his race towards the front.

The train's crew were very proud of their load of mammoth tanks for the front. The first of these crews, which took us on at the factory, consisted of engine driver Pokrovsky, his assistant Lebedkov, the fireman Tokarev and the guard Savinyk. We shall long remember this crew as well as all the others that brought us to the front.

The armour-plate express swept on past cities and villages, signal towers and sub-stations. There were hundreds of them on our long route, and everywhere the people cheered us and gazed after us with eyes full of hope and gratitude.

At any little station which we passed at reduced speed both young and old ran out to meet the train. No need to guess what freight the open trains were carrying. A 'K.V.' is not a needle nor even a harvester combine. In any case a large poster had been pasted on the side of one of the trucks. It depicted a mammoth tank with a trunk instead of a gun. The trunk had gripped Hitler in three deadly coils and the huge feet of the mammoth—its tracks—were crushing a pack of wolf-shaped Nazis. "Let our Soviet Mammoth crush the Nazi Wolves!" read the caption under this poster. A Red Army-man named Teslya had drawn it for us. This poster was received with laughter and admiration by all who saw it. When we stopped at a station people would gather round it saying: "That's the way. Choke the bloody Nazis!" ran the general comment.

Further and further west we rolled over the land of our fathers, the great, vast Soviet Union. The boundless collective farm fields were wrapped in a blanket of snow. At the horizon they merged with the sky and the two became indistinguishable. All this seemingly infinite expanse was our own, our native land.

The train plunged on through the dense forest, and its rattling roar combined with the shrieks of the engine to disturb the quiet of century-old oaks and magnificent firs covered with hoar frost. As an overtone to the clanking swish of the wheels we seemed to hear

the music of our own movement. The strident medley of sound was reverberated in all keys and tones in a softened, modulated form by the resonant echo of the forest. It was as if the forest approved our violation of its peace. As if trees and bushes whispered among themselves : "Those are our boys roaring past." Million after million of trees welcomed us and saw us off on our long journey, and every single one of them was ours, growing on native Soviet soil.

We thundered across bridges over rivers, lakes and canals and at many a place we passed the energy latent in the Russian rivers and lakes was being utilized, even in winter. All these expanses of water so abundantly stocked with energy and tasty fish belong to us; they are ours and will be ours throughout the ages.

How many factories and mills, railway depots, machine tractor stations and electric power stations our eyes could delight in along our route. And all of them, from the gigantic plant where our tanks were built to the pumps at the stations that fed our huge locomotive, are our own, are Soviet property. The factories, the fields, farms, forests and rivers past which our tank train was speeding belong to the Soviet people, to us, the masters of the Russian soil, the free citizens of the Land of Soviets. In defence of all this wealth and freedom from the foul attack by the savage Nazi hordes, we now were speeding westward. How could we help being proud of the honourable task that we had been assigned!

We remembered how much of this task still lay ahead of us in the districts where, for the time being, the Nazis were lording it over the land! This too was our own, our Soviet possession. But first it had to be won back, by fierce fighting. This was why Georgi Konstantinov, the driver of the first tank, a Byelorussian, was on his way to rescue his native Byelorussia from the clutches of the Nazis and bring deliverance to his family whom he had left there. The same applied to Nicolai Pipa, the radio operator of the second tank, a son of the Ukraine, ready to give his life, if need be, to release his beloved country from the foul Nazi yoke. The same spirit imbued all those travelling with him. Every one of us on this train had the right to consider himself a loyal son of his great, multi-national fatherland to which we must restore Byelorussia and the Ukraine and Odessa and Novgorod. We did not yet know exactly to which front we were going. One thing, however, we did know with absolute exactness—that we were going to the front of our Great Patriotic War.

The Tank Express kept on devouring space. A vital link connected it with its environment and at the same time it had its own, domestic life in the world of tanks. The tank crews became quite attached to their box cars with the little iron stoves and new plank beds that still bore the fragrant smell of pine. In those cars the tankmen carried on their various military duties, stood guard over the huge machines and spent their leisure hours. On the stoves they heated their tin cans and ran out for hot water at stations where the train made a stop.

At one station where we stopped I saw Georgi Konstantinov, the driver, get down from his machine. He had been sitting there several hours warming it up from time to time, with the thermometer registering forty-five centigrade below zero and an unmanageable wind blowing all the while.

"How goes it?" asked Efimov, the commander of the tank.

"Engine's ticking over beautifully. We don't give it a chance to freeze up on us."

Konstantinov was a broad-shouldered, energetic young fellow of 23 with a swarthy skin and a rather serious air about him. He knew these tanks better than anyone else and even expert technicians would turn to him for assistance. He had already had experience of fighting on two different fronts. He had been in the Khalkhin Gol affair, and fought throughout the whole of the Finnish campaign on the Karelian Isthmus. Now he was on his way to his third front.

Another of the drivers, Eugen Dormidontov, a Muscovite, was no less experienced. He was a husky, sturdy Russian with a pleasant, gentle expression and with big, grey eyes full of shrewdness. He was a very lively humorous fellow, always fond of a joke and he spread an atmosphere of hilarity around him even rousing the romantic Vedishev from his habitual melancholy. He was also very popular on account of his singing.

"Gene, sing that 'Eaglet' song." "Gene, give us 'Suliko'." They never tired of hearing him sing their favourites.

"O.K. Right away!" he would say, "give me a chance to take the proper pose," and he would settle down comfortably on his bunk before he uttered a sound.

When he spoke he mispronounced his R's as children are apt to do, but this, too, everyone liked. His speech always had the effect of a child's caress.

Dormidontov's berth was the last one in the box car, near the little window. He had chosen it on purpose, as he liked to gaze at the passing landscape and lose himself in it. His musical repertoire always included some song that seemed to have been specially composed for forests, fields or rivers.

When Dormidontov sang, nobody else made a sound. The men would crowd closely round him and listen to his soft, liquid tenor rendering of a Georgian song about love and a nightingale. Vedishev could not tear his eyes away. In a friendly chat by the red-hot stove this little radio operator with his girlish face and slow manner of speech confided to me that he loved trees and gardens more than anything else in the world. All his life he had dreamed of becoming a gardener, growing fruits and berries and of cultivating new species, like Michurin. He had already started work in a state farm orchard when the war broke out.

"You can bet that as soon as we smash Hitler I'll go back to that job and I want you all to come and visit me there. You ought

to see what delicious apples I'll grow," he said enthusiastically. He was really in love with his peace-time occupation of bustling around blooming pear-trees and fragrant apple-trees. But we had a war on our hands—a war forced upon us, a war we have got to win. And so it for the time being became necessary to learn some military speciality. His commander said that Vedishev was the best radio operator in the whole outfit. You could rely on Vedishev to give everything he had, even his life, to defend the fertile fields and green gardens which he loved so well.

Every morning and evening Astakhov himself gave a short political talk. Tossing his helmet on the seat and running his fingers through his thick auburn hair, he would say :

"I shall now try and give you some idea of what's really going on in this world of ours."

The radio afforded the train a window through which to peep at world events. Sitting all day in their speeding cars the tank crews were very keen to know all about the events with which they were so closely connected and gratefully tapped the ether for all the news it bore, especially about the Soviet-German front.

The nearer they came to the front the wider the car doors stayed open. Neither front nor wind could daunt the tankmen in their padded jackets and felt boots. "We've got to see whom we're overtaking and whom we're meeting, haven't we?" At one of the stops somebody suddenly shouted: "Look, fellers! That's from the front!" And despite the fact that most of them had already been in action and enemy machines were no novelty to them, they all ran up to a truck on which a battered Nazi tank had been hoisted.

"Hey, Professor," shouted Dormidontov to Konstantinov, who was familiar with every type of German machine. "Call your class to order." They hoisted Konstantinov up on to the truck and he outlined all the fighting points of the Nazi tank.

"You can see for yourselves," he said, pointing to the dozens of holes in the armour plate, "what a high-quality machine *this* is. Not in the same street as our K.V."

"I wish we would hurry up and get at them," remarked the usually so quiet Vedishev impatiently.

The armour-plate express was approaching the front line. It had covered over 1,500 miles in a little over two days. Good for you, railroad workers! During the last lap the train was manned by a highly experienced crew that had been railroading in the fighting zone ever since the beginning of the war. The engine driver was S. Dmitriev, his assistant P. Alexeyev, the fireman P. Epiphanov and the conductor I. Polonichenko.

The roar of guns could be heard in the distance. The front was only a few miles away by road. The tanks were already geared up and the crews had taken their places. Now the brakes were being applied to the wheels of the train. In the half darkness you

could see the platform on one side of the line. Another few minutes and all the machines would be safely back on *terra firma*. The 'Mammoth' tanks had arrived at the front.

CHAPTER VI

SCIENCE AT THE FRONT

THE 'Mammoths' stole unnoticed into a front line village buried up to the eaves in snow drifts. A score or more of lighter tanks clattered into the village after them, manœuvring rapidly between huts and stumpy willows.

Meanwhile there was no place to hide the 'K.V.s'. To station them between the houses would mean smashing all the gardens, outhouses and fences. But the machines had to be hidden in a hurry, for there was certain to be an air raid at dawn.

Lt. Astakhov had his hands full. It was easy to spot his tall figure against the white backcloth of the snow as he hustled about at the outskirts of the village. "You can't call these machines; they're more like grain elevators," he grumbled.

"Second-Lieutenant Gomozov and Lieutenant Efimov, you park here at the edge of the village on the right and left, and pretend you're houses."

On a slope leading to a small river not far from the village Astakhov spotted an old bath-house most conveniently placed for defending the village. He pointed towards it and told Lieutenant Chilikin: "No good squatting alongside it. It's bound to have been noted as a landmark standing by itself like that. Just bash into it, then you'll be the bathhouse."

Astakhov decided to send the remaining two machines to a small pine wood that showed up black against the village in the early blue twilight. "I'll give you half an hour to camouflage them up so that nothing will be noticeable," he said.

Next morning enemy scouting planes scoured the locality. Singly and in pairs they roared low over our village but evidently discovered nothing suspicious. All the houses, real and sham, looked innocent enough, with their curls of white smoke. The two 'K.V.s' that had been fixed up at the edge of the village were also smoking, just like the huts alongside them. They were covered with white canvas for roofing and stove chimneys had been set up on top. To match the rest of the village, hoar-covered trees surrounded the new 'huts,' and they even had their lean-to outhouses run up from various pieces of wood lying about.

The bath-house by the river was still there just the same as before;

only it looked rather swollen. The tank had barged an opening in one wall, forced its way inside with its nose and had a layer of timber piled over it. The machines which had been camouflaged in the wood were so well screened by the pines that they could only be spotted if the entire wood were destroyed.

After several days of continuous travel and work, the tank crews slept like logs. But a sharp look-out was maintained by sentries in the village—and all tanks were kept warmed up.

While we were still at the railhead depot we were met by Senior Political Instructor Belanchevadze, the inspector of the Army Political Department. He was full of snap and energy, with a shrewd expression and rather thoughtful eyes. His first words were:

"I shall be fighting alongside you," and since then he has been living with us 'in one pot,' as they say here.

Belanchevadze had been at the front since the beginning of the war. He was a tankman himself. Already on the second day he made it his business to get acquainted with all the crews and chat with them. After this he came along to the commanding officer and the commissar of the battalion to which our five 'K.V.s' belonged and announced: "Many of your men have been in action before. That's good. But you haven't got much front-line experience of the latest variety. That's not so good."

This official statement had the effect of putting Major Maximov's back up. "How do you make that out?" he snapped. "Here we are at the front and now we're suddenly told we haven't had any experience! We've all done quite a bit of fighting before, even in this war."

"That's not enough, Major," said Belanchevadze. "Even if you'd been here two weeks ago you'd be a back number already. That's the way it goes in this war. Every day brings new experience. Tank fighting is an art. It's also a science. And science never stands still. It has to be constantly enriched by new facts."

In his quiet and business-like way Belanchevadze, who knew his job inside out, cited a few historic examples for the benefit of the major, who was feeling somewhat ruffled. He reminded him how Frunze, one of the greatest Soviet generals and a man of quite exceptional calibre, never disdained to add even a peppercorn of fighting experience to his already vast store of military knowledge. He finished by saying:

"When you were fighting it was summer. Now it is winter. You fought in one type of machine. Now we have other types: To all this you must add the fact that the enemy long ago radically changed his tactics as compared with those he used at the beginning of the war."

The next day several lorry loads of tankmen, who had been at the front since the outbreak of the war, arrived.

"Here you are!" said Belanchevadze with a smile as he crawled out of the driver's seat. "Come on, let's all get together."

The guests were given a cordial welcome. We all crowded into a big hut. Everybody settled themselves as comfortably as possible and rapidly became acquainted.

Senior in rank among the guests was Major Segeda, a tank battalion commander, a lively fluent talker with a jolly Ukrainian face and rather foxy eyes. Even when angry and frowning he managed to preserve a merry look. A long, unruly forelock would keep falling down over his eyes and nose, covering up the forbidding frown on his forehead.

It soon turned out that both groups had many mutual friends and acquaintances at the tank factory. Segeda's tanks had been manufactured by the same plant, though before its evacuation to the Urals.

"Well, how are they getting along there in the Urals?" Segeda asked.

"They live well, and they work still better," Astakhov said. "They commissioned us to crush the Germans in a hurry."

"We're going to supply the Leningrad front as well. They'll get some solid help now," Segeda said determinedly, and the grim look on his face showed that he meant what he said.

Segeda's voice was high-pitched and emotional, yet somewhat raucous. This latter quality seemed to upset him, for in conversation he tried to help out his voice and give it more conviction by the addition of all kinds of other sounds, such as clicking his tongue, pounding his fist on the table. When he described some war episode he would suddenly jump up from his seat, and his plump figure would try to illustrate a tank movement. Then he would stoop down, take aim and pounding the table with his fist, or slapping his boots with his gloves, he would open 'fire' on an imaginary target. One of the stories which he told us in this picturesque and vivid manner was about an unusual tank attack in which he acted the parts of both tank commander and driver.

"It was pretty tough work," he said. "The driver was wounded in the hand and I had to take his place. For the ninth time our tank was charging an enemy strong point. We had already succeeded in crashing into their positions. We had been fighting all day and accounted for over a hundred Fritzes, crushed a couple of guns and blown up about a dozen dug-outs.

"When we made our ninth attack the Fritzes were in a panic, running all over the place. But amongst them were some tank destroyers. They were hiding in a trench with big bundles of well-tied hand-grenades, evidently waiting for us.

"I trod on the gas and we roared forward at the German trench, destroying the destroyers with our gun and machine-guns. Suddenly the gunner reported there were no more shells left. I yelled to him to keep cracking with the machine-gun.

"No more bullets, comrade Major," he yelled back.

"O.K." I said. "Just keep a good look-out on top. We'll crush the bastards yet."

"Once more I gave her the gas for all she was worth and we drove on against the parapet of the biggest trench of the lot. I heard a voice shout:

"'Fritz with a hand-grenade!'

"The tank crashed forward again. The German who had stuck his head out of the trench was already reaching out to throw his bundle of hand-grenades at me. I pulled up and mechanically pressed the siren button.

"Woo—Woo—Woo—Woo! The shriek of the siren was too much for that Fritz. He dived back into the trench. 'Well, what do you know about that?' I said to myself. 'I didn't think it would work that well.' But the Fritzie reappeared and swung his arm for a throw. O.K., I said, we'll try it again.

"Woo—Woo—Woo—Woo! And Fritz vanished. The siren had done the trick again. Some fighter that Fritz! He heard a whistle and thought it was a shell. I could make those phantom shells last for quite a time.

"Then Fritz popped up for the third time with his blasted bunch of grenades at the ready.

"I was just going to give him another ghost shell on the siren when there was a dull plop from the tank's gun and, lo and behold! a column of fire struck the fascist bang in the mouth. He fell in a heap at the edge of the trench, yelling like a stuck pig. It happened that Kononov, my gunner, had decided to supplement my ghostly artillery with a common or garden signal rocket. After taking careful aim he had fired at him point-blank. I'll say it was point-blank. The Germans evidently believed we had some new-fangled gun and were terrified by the howling row and the multi-coloured firework display. But after a while the rockets also gave out and all we had left was the siren. Hardly very powerful artillery, you must admit. And by now it had dawned on the Germans that we had run out of stuff. They came rushing towards the tank shouting: 'Russ kaput! Russ kaput!' calling on us to surrender. Again I opened the throttle wide and dashed full speed towards them. I was trying to get them under my tracks along the edge of the trench but they managed to get back to their trench and started lobbing hand-grenades at us. Then it flashed through my mind that we too had some 'lemons' of our own. I shouted to the gunner to open the bottom hatch and get the grenades ready, and headed the tank for the biggest trench where over twenty Nazis were bunched together, still shouting 'Russ kaput.' The tank lumbered round right over the heads of the Germans, and came to a standstill athwart the trench with its bottom hatch open. Kononov knew what he had to do. He showered the Nazis with 'lemons' and wiped out the lot. The Germans in the remaining trenches took to their heels, seeing that there was no way of getting us.

"I peered through the hatch into the trench.

"'Well, Fritz,' I said, 'who got the worse of the bargain?'

"'No answer.'

" 'You got yours, you lousy curs,' I said. 'Don't shout *kaput* while we're around.' "

Major Segeda's unit had had considerable and very successful fighting experience, especially with the heavy 'K.V.s'. During the past few weeks alone they had smashed 93 German guns, 50 machine-gun nests, 10 mortars, 5 tanks and 20 redoubts. In addition to all this their tank tracks, guns and machine-guns had accounted for two German infantry regiments. Sen. Sergeant Naidin, one of the gunners, had bagged 11 German tanks although he had been wounded several times.

Sen. Sergeant Tsekalov had driven his 'K.V.' into action forty times. He wiped out hundreds of Nazis and smashed about 20 guns, and several tanks and lorries. His tank had received many direct shell hits, the fragments of which remained embedded in the armour plating. Such was the proficiency of the crew that the machine did not have a single accident or breakdown. Like an old war-horse, she was still going into battle.

"And now," said Segeda, "we'll get down to production questions."

His intention was to acquaint the crews who had just arrived at the front with the various methods of using tanks under the strenuous conditions prevailing in this area and with the best ways of counteracting the various stratagems of the enemy.

For this purpose Segeda's drivers, gunners and radio operators had long talks with their opposite numbers in the new 'K.V.' battalion.

The village was now seething with activity. The tank crews from the front not only talked but lent a hand in the installation of the various appliances in the 'K.V.s', started up the engines, gave them a short spin, showed the crews how to make repairs quickly, how to take in fuel quickly under fire, how and where to seat infantry for riding on tanks, etc. Two days later our tank crews went up to visit Segeda's unit. There the tanks were fuelled not for practice but under enemy fire. During all these exercises the men and commanders were in the highest spirits and extremely grateful to those who had organized them.

"Our boys have been put wise to a lot of things they didn't know before," said Dormidontov.

With the general consent of the command, Belanchevadze's suggestion for a partial exchange of tank crews was adopted. The less experienced men were temporarily assigned to Segeda's unit for practical training until they qualified for actual fighting, and some of Segeda's veterans were allotted to our battalion.

Five experienced men were assigned to Astakhov for various duties. First, Corporal Bolshunov, with a record of two hundred hours of tank driving in action. Second, Sen. Sergeant Tenditny, who had charged the enemy twenty-eight times with his tank. Third, Junior Sergeant Gordeyev, an expert at ramming. Once, when driving his tank at a furious pace into a village, his tracks crushed

two enemy guns. There were two more guns behind a stone wall. As there was no room to turn, Gordeyev backed, crashed through the wall, and got the other two guns. Anti-tank rifles and machine-guns kept plugging at him from an attic near-by. Gordeyev, getting away from a flying start, dived right through the wall of the house, carried off the entire ceiling and roof on his tank and gave the Nazis in the attic the shake-up of their lives, finishing them off with machine-gun fire. Fourth, Junior Sergeant Kononov, a gunner commander and a crack shot. Of him it was said that on one occasion when he was surrounded he fought his way out for sixteen hours in a damaged machine. Wounded in the hand he continued to defend his tank until help arrived. Fifth, private Maschev, another gunner who had taken part in more than twenty battles.

All these lads were joyfully welcomed in our midst. They were to share our fortunes in battle from the start.

One most interesting and instructive class was held, a reading of the latest German instructions on how to fight our tanks. They had been taken from the dead body of a Nazi anti-tank battery commander.

'How to Fight the Heavy Russian Tanks' ran the heading of the instructions. The first paragraph read:

'The fact that the enemy employs heavy tanks which cannot be crushed by German tanks makes it necessary to find a solution for this problem.'

So the Germans are anxious to find a solution, we said to ourselves. But instead of finding a solution they must have nearly given themselves a nervous breakdown as the result of their fantastic efforts. The pages of instructions that followed were a mere rehash of the already known methods of anti-tank fighting. Nor were the ranting and furious vituperations with which the pages teemed of any avail. The Soviet 'K.V.' has put the kibosh on the German tank, the mainstay of their fighting on land.

'The German tanks,' said the instructions, 'are designed, under normal conditions, to destroy the tanks of the enemy during offensive operations. In the present war, however, they are not able to accomplish this task with their former equipment. The destruction of super-tanks must therefore be assigned to infantry shock detachments.'

So this is Hitler's famous panzer army. From now on German infantry soldiers, unprotected by any armour, have got to tackle Soviet tanks. This is the only means left of combating our machines. Tanks, artillery and aircraft can no longer do the job. What an 'impenetrable' wall the bare bellies of Nazi foot-soldiers represent for our tanks we had already learnt from Segeda's vivid stories.

The methods to be employed by these 'infantry shock detachments' now formed in the German army were, of course, of interest to us and we tried to commit them to memory so as to be prepared for all eventualities in battle.

The most interesting of the instructions, and one that aroused

a good deal of amusement was the last. This fixed a price for each of our different tanks.

"Every soldier," promised the instructions, "who destroys a Russian tank weighing 26, 32 or 52 tons is to be cited for an award. In addition to this, everyone who destroys a tank of 26 or 32 tons will receive an eight-day furlough with leave to go home. The destruction of a 52-ton tank entitles the party concerned to a 14-day furlough."

"So one of our 'Manimoths' is worth 14 days' leave of absence," grinned Astakhov.

"Not on your life," said Dormidontov, "just wait till we get cracking and we'll get them leave everlasting."

This was how the tank crews on their arrival at the front were taught the science of tank fighting by men who had actually and recently been through it. Now it was up to us to contribute our bit to this science by our own fighting experience. This was soon to come.

CHAPTER VII

NEW YEAR'S EVE

THIS morning Driver-Mechanic Eugen Dormidontov was one of the first to go out to his machine, which he had left standing in the pine wood over-night. He strode rapidly through the vegetable gardens to the wood, looking carefully around for the hiding place of his tank. His trained eye was soon able to distinguish his own tank from the others by the particular way in which the camouflage twigs had been arranged.

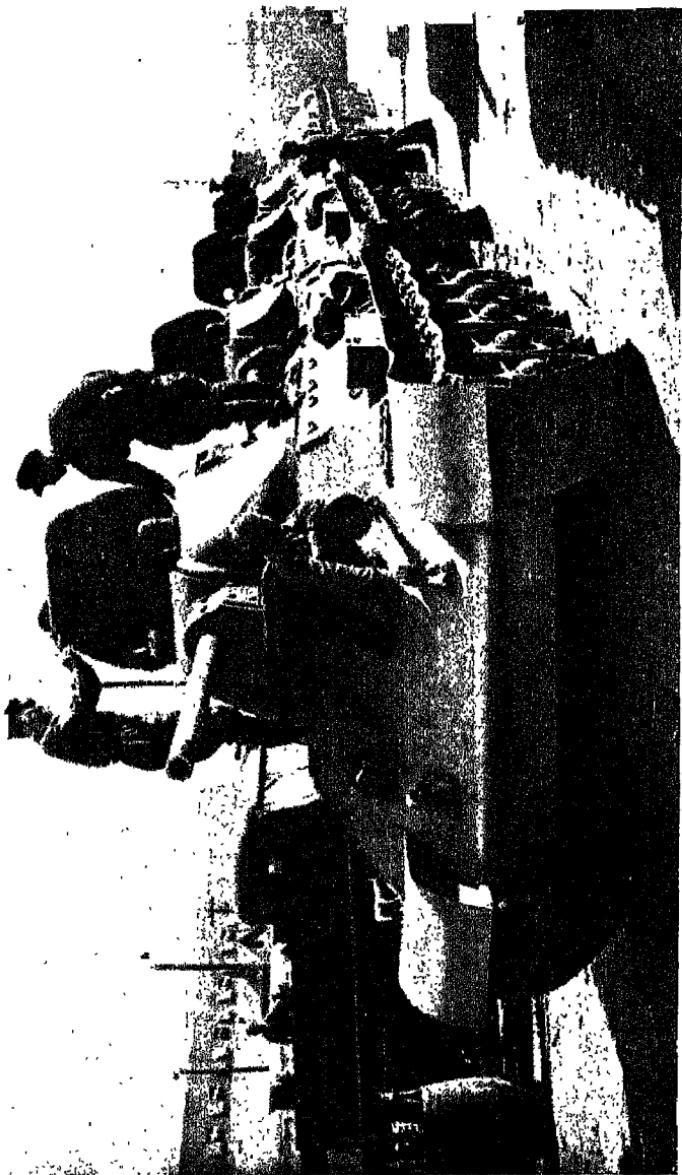
Dormidontov quickly threw off the tarpaulin that covered the hatch. He looked at the inscription on the turret—"Happy New Year." It had been put there when the tank was still at the factory. Eugen patted the turret affectionately.

"So you wish me a Happy New Year, my little pet mammoth?" he said gently. "Quite right! To-day is the thirty-first. Many happy returns of the day to you!"

Dormidontov clambered about the machine, carrying out his routine inspection even more meticulously than usual because of his holiday mood. He was soon joined by the other members of the crew : Shishov, Solovyov and Pisaryev.

"Well, boys," said Eugen, "we may have a chance to give the Germans our New Year's greetings in person to-night. So all of you'd better have a good look at everything."

The boys had a good look : Solovyov, the assistant mechanic, crawled over to the engine and got busy polishing the machinery.



Leaving for the Front.



The Start of an Assignment.

Pisaryev, the gunner, with loving care dusted the copper cases and dove-coloured steel heads of the armour-piercing shrapnel shells.

"Nice little bunch of New Year's presents," he said to Dormidontov with a wink. "I'm sure the Fritzes can hardly wait to get them."

Pisaryev tested the locking mechanism of the gun turret, and decided to let the engine rotate the turret so that the gun might face "in all sixteen directions," as he put it. But he had only given the turret one turn when he heard the voice of Kalinichev, the tank commander, in none too gentle tones.

"What's the matter with you? Are you blind in there? Don't you see you're busting up the whole wood with your gun?"

"But I'm not shooting at all," mumbled Pisaryev, and he climbed through the upper hatch to see what was the matter.

Then he realized why his superior officer had pulled him up. The long barrel of the gun, acting like a powerful flail, had played havoc with nearly a dozen pine saplings which had been planted around the tank during the night in order to screen it.

The crew at once got to work restoring the overthrown saplings to their former state. But the tank commander went on scowling with dissatisfaction at Pisaryev. "You've knocked all the frost off the trees," he said. "That's not proper camouflage. I ought to make you breathe on every one of them to make them look hoary."

After the camouflaging the members of the crew went back to their own jobs. Dormidontov, as was his habit, sang one gay song after another.

Evening came, with a sky as blue and an air as frosty as in the morning. The temperature dropped to over 30° Centigrade below zero.

The tankmen assembled with their mess tins in one of the roomy huts of the village to get their supper. They sat on fragrant rye straw which had been spread on the floor of the hut; their eyes were fixed intently on their commander, Astakhov, and the battalion commissar, Kharchenko, both of whom sat in the corner under the icons, evidently about to say something.

Astakhov stood up. Immediately there was silence in the hut; the hay stopped rustling.

"It is possible, comrades, that we'll be in action to-night," Astakhov said, "and then again we may not. The Germans in the front line seem to be nervous about something. In other words, forget about sleep to-night. Everybody must be on the alert, sitting ready at his place in his machine."

Astakhov was followed by Commissar Kharchenko, who spoke as usual with strong emotion and his appeal went straight to our heart: "So we're going to celebrate New Year, 1942, in our tanks. The lousy Hanscs and Fritzes expected to see us by this time in concentration camps, behind barbed wire. But it's turned out that we're coming right up against their noses in heavy Soviet tanks. This means a lot, comrades. Just think for a moment: our unit

has arrived at the very border line that divides us from the enemy. But at the same time we have also arrived at another border line—the line that divides 1941 from 1942. Our whole country stands on that line. It is already attacking and routing the Hitler bandits along the whole front. The New Year, 1942, will be the year of our victory. This new year starts to-night. We'll celebrate the event at exactly twelve midnight with a glass of vodka all round. But if the order to attack comes at that time, never mind the glasses but keep loading your guns and giving the Germans nice new coffins for New Year's Day!"

There was a cheerful laugh all round when Kharchenko had finished speaking; then the tankmen plunged their spoons into the smoking stew of pea soup and meat, and munched huge chunks of rye-bread.

"Stoke up for the New Year, boys," shouted Nesterenko, the cook, who was dishing the portions out of thermos containers.

Only a few hours of 1941 were left. The tarpaulins were already off the tanks, the camouflage saplings were removed; the guns and armour-plate were stripped for action. Everything was ready to go into action and enter on the New Year's battle. The Germans continued to show signs of nervousness: from time to time their long-range guns could be heard to bark, hurling shells at random into space. A machine-gun rattled spasmodically, but soon fell silent again.

"Those devils over there are shivering in their boots, both literally and metaphorically; I can tell by the way they fire," said Pisarev.

In order not to give away our positions, our artillery did not reply to the desultory fire of the frost-nipped Germans. A duel of nerves was going on. It would have been an easy matter for our gunners to silence one of the roaring enemy guns, but why give ourselves away ahead of time when we were getting ready for much more serious business—a sudden onslaught against the enemy that would bring about his defeat on an entire section of the front?

Meanwhile Driver-Mechanic Dornidontov, whose tank was all ready for action long ago, was engrossed in a mysterious and purely peaceful occupation. Dornidontov's genial, playful temperament could not stomach the idea of New Year's Eve amidst pines and firs without a New Year tree.

"What do you say, boys," he had said to his crew in a confidential wheedling tone, looking around to see he was not being overheard. "Let's get toys for a tree and in the evening we'll have a little party in our tank. Let's steal a march on all the other crews and invite them to our little party." The boys jumped at Eugen's idea. But where were they going to get toys and what kind of toys?

In the same copse where the 'Mammoth' tanks were stationed some other machines, companions-in-arms, as it were, also took up their posts. During the course of the day I had already noticed how a black-haired young tankman in neat fur-lined overalls was

painting in light-blue letters on the turret of his machine the following words: 'Let us avenge our Soviet girls!' Three times the tankman stepped back a few paces, carefully examined the inscription, screwed up his eyes, leant his head now to the right, now to the left, bent down and stood up, but each time he went back to the turret to touch up a letter which did not seem to him to be quite up to the mark.

Finally he stood some paces away from the turret and thought and thought as to what could still be lacking. Then he marched firmly back to the turret and, dipping the splinter of wood which he had been using as a brush into the paint pot, he added with a flourish the word 'beloved,' so that the inscription now read: 'Let us avenge our beloved Soviet girls!'

The tankman smiled, satisfied with his masterpiece, and marched back again to examine it at a distance. Then the commander of the tank, Jnr. Lt. Dayev, came up, and, after reading the inscription, started an argument with the tankman.

"Did I tell you to add that word?"

"No, you didn't."

"Well, why did you put it in?"

"It's a nice word, Comrade Commander, and there was a little space left."

"I know it's a nice word," the commander said angrily, "but you haven't made such a nice job of it. Now you've got a whole column of words. You might get it into your head yet to write a full declaration of love on the turret, mightn't you?"

The tankman stood silently with downcast eyes. It was painful for him to realize that he had made a mistake. As for the tank commander, he simply could not recover his composure. He muttered the inscription several times to himself, each time stressing the word 'beloved' which the tankman had put in.

"You know, comrade commander," said the tankman boldly, "it really is very appropriate. It brings the memory of what happened at Zlocwa back to me."

An abrupt change passed over the lieutenant's features. His face suddenly became gloomy and stern. He must have been thinking of some horrible past experience that jarred on his nerves. He did not answer. He glanced hurriedly at the scarlet inscription on the turret. His tightly compressed lips trembled so that he was unable to utter the word 'beloved.' But his grief-stricken eyes and trembling lips kept on soundlessly repeating it. Then he turned sharply to the right and walked off.

There was still about half an hour left of the Old Year. In accordance with their orders, the tank crews were sitting in their machines ready for action. They were telling each other in glowing phrases how they had spent New Year's Eve last year. But no order for action came. Evidently the Germans did not contemplate

anything serious that night, and the time for our own offensive had not yet come. Suddenly the command rang out, in vibrant tones: "At ease! Celebrate New Year, each crew for itself!"

Instantaneously every machine resounded with a joyful bustle. I was in Astakhov's tank. Tenditny, the driver, pulled out of his bag a pint of vodka, a blue bottle that looked like a steel shell. It was just enough for five men and the contents which had been issued by the quartermaster sergeant were the real stuff.

"Get your cups ready," Tenditny exclaimed, deliberately raising his voice, and everybody eagerly held out his enamel mug. The gurgling 'fuel,' as vodka is called hereabouts at the front, was soon dispensed. Refreshments were already sizzling on the electric stove—canned meat deliciously flavoured with bay leaves and tomatoes.

"To the health of our Supreme Commander-in-Chief, Stalin!" Astakhov solemnly pronounced this toast in the finest bass he could muster.

"To the health of the workers who gave us our tanks!" added Predannikov.

Then they all shouted in chorus: "Here goes to victory in 1942!" and after clinking their cups, drained them in unison with parade ground precision.

The frosty night air was filled with the hum of men's voices. The tanks sounded almost like dove-cots. Everybody was thinking, everybody was thinking the same question: 'When do we start fighting?'

Suddenly the hatch of our tank opened and a patch of sparkling starry sky flashed down on our party. The sky was at once blotted out by the cheerful face of Dormidontov who stuck his head inside our tank.

"May I invite you to our New Year tree party in our tank?" he said, immediately withdrawing his head.

The idea of a tree, especially at Dormidontov's tank, took all the crews by storm. Everybody got out of their tanks at once and there was a general scramble. A long string of guests from the whole battalion collected round Dormidontov's tank which was stationed a bit further off, close to the most graceful, most beautiful of all the fir trees.

As we came up to Dormidontov's tank we were positively dumbfounded; a native fir tree, not one that had been uprooted and dug into the ground but one which had been growing on the spot since the day of its birth, was decorated with hundreds of toys. There were no candles but the tree shone with the gold and silver sheen of the toys whose bright surface reflected the light of the moon. Golden moonbeams were dancing on the copper of the cartridges and shells, silver flashes were reflected by the festoons of empty tins. Hanging from the tree were a host of attractive and clever decorations devised by the ingenious Dormidontov—cigarette packets, biscuits, yellow streamers of bast, bits of coloured paper, newspaper pages and

even parachute straps taken from the wrecked German plane that was lying in the field not far from our camp.

The main attraction of the evening, however, was not on the tree but close beside it—the 'K.V.' tank with 'A Happy New Year!' lettered gaily on the turret. The guests were greeted by Kalinichev, the commander of the tank; of Dormidontov himself there was no sign; he had mysteriously disappeared. Kharchenko, the battalion commissar, was in a particularly cheerful frame of mind. He walked about with a satisfied air, laughing and joking with the tank crews and challenging them to show him another tree like it in the whole battalion. But no one was able to answer the challenger; there was no other such inventive genius as Eugen Dormidontov, who was always bent on providing amusement for the troops.

Then the tank commander raised his hand for silence.

"On behalf of our crew," he said, "I invite you to listen to 'Jack Frost,' who is visiting our battalion and will take part in our New Year celebration. Jack Frost has the floor."

Next moment, a curious spectacle appeared in front of the assembled tank crews. Parting the green branches of the New Year tree, the massive figure of snow-covered Jack Frost strode forward, full of self-importance. He was wearing a fur coat turned inside out. A long beard trailed down to the ground at his feet. He held an automatic in one hand. Grenades were slung around his belt. On his head was a tankman's crash helmet.

"Happy New Year, friends!" said Jack Frost in a fake, husky bass.

"It's Gene! You might have known that much!" exclaimed Dormidontov's admirers at once.

"Well, Jack, let's hear something good."

"Don't freeze your nose off though, Jack Frost!"

Everybody was in high, expectant spirits.

"I came together with you to the front," Jack Frost went on, more seriously, "to fight in the just cause of the Russian people shoulder to shoulder with you, to help you annihilate the accursed Nazis." And then Jack burst into song :

It wasn't wind howling in the pines
Nor the rivulets cascading and foaming;
It was I, scouting around
As I roamed over my lands
I saw to-day how blizzards
Had covered the forest roads;
Through chinks I invaded dug-outs
And fought my way into the naked earth.
I visited Fritz and Heinie
And scrutinized their plight;
What are the odds that the enemy
Will win out in this fight?

At this point Jack Frost broke off and resumed in prose: "And I saw, comrades, that Heinie's chances were extremely slim. His teeth

are chattering with cold. From time to time hunger drives him to start some dolorous song. I walked about freely among the Germans and they were all afraid even to ask me to show my pass. When I went up to a sentry and grabbed his nose it was immediately turned into a white frozen potato. In order to get more closely acquainted, I shook their hands and even their feet as firmly as I could. No sooner did I grab one of their thin leather shoes than instead of a foot I found I was holding a wooden last. Each time the result was the same: Friend Hans hobbled off to the hospital where he got a real last to replace his foot. In one place I visited I saw the most charming girl; she quite took my breath away, silly old fool that I am. She was walking along the street in neat little boots, a cloak and a fur hat—a fascinating creature. I followed on her heels. 'I'll remember my youth,' I thought, 'and try to make a hit with her somehow.' At last I caught up with her and gently pinched her silk-stockinged legs. The little devil kicked up her heels as if welcoming me and moved on with mincing steps. So now I may proceed to storm the fort, I thought, and resolved to start with a kiss on the cheek—a flank attack. I wheeled around on one caterpillar, opened wide the throttle and pounced on my enchantress. But to my horror I found that my beard had got entangled with the stinking moustache of a German corporal. I jerked my head back in loathing . . . I still haven't got the filthy taste out of my mouth; it will pass in time and I shall forget it, but as long as he lives that German corporal will never forget the gentle kiss he got from Jack Frost.

"So make use of my services, tankmen, to beat the Nazis both fore and aft. I am a loyal friend of yours and your best ally. You're a fine lot. It's a cinch for you to lick that lousy bunch of Heinies who haven't a chance in the world.

"At the same time I warn you all that I am by no means hail-fellow-well-met under all circumstances. If you forget to drain your radiators I'll freeze them up and your machine won't budge. If you don't keep your arms well greased, some parts will stick and neither guns nor rifles will fire. Let us have a working partnership, form a strong alliance, and our victory in 1942 over Hitler's frost-bitten bands will be assured. I, for my part, undertake to freeze the Nazis at every step, to turn their bestial drunkard's brains to ice, so that you will be able to say of me in the words of Nekrassov, the great Russian poet, slightly altered:

He walks among the trees and his boots
Crack the ice;
His beard gleams in the bright sun
Of glorious victory."

There was a vigorous clapping from the fur-gloved hands of the tank crews. The men were elated at Jack Frost's New Year speech and gave due praise to Dormidontov who had acted his part excellently.

Later that night I looked in for a visit to the tank of Jnr. Lt. Dayev

and his men—the bachelor's crew, as they were afterwards called. They had also celebrated the New Year with a little wine party in their tank, ready at action stations in case the order was given for battle, Against the white background of the tank's turret you could read in letters of scarlet the following words : 'Let us avenge our beloved Soviet girls!'

I asked the crew if they would mind telling me about the girls they were going to avenge. "Where did you leave them?" I said.

Dayev was rather embarrassed at this. "We shall avenge them all," he said, evasively.

"Do you think you could bear to mention any names?" I said.

"Lida was left behind, wasn't she?" asked the young tankman who had written the inscription on the turret.

"Yes," said Dayev softly, looking dreamily into the distance. "Lida stayed in Zlocwa."

It would have been impossible to probe any further into his heart but Dayev went on of his own accord :

"If I hadn't been wounded," he said, "I would have taken her along. She even came to see me in hospital, brought me flowers and handkerchiefs. And then they suddenly transferred me to another place."

Another member of the crew who was standing near the turret, said in resolute tones : "We'll find our girls yet. We'll find them and deliver them from the clutches of the Germans. You see," he added, "the same thing happened to all four of us."

Each one of them then confided his story to me and told me the name of the girl he left behind in German captivity.

When the crew of this tank raised their brimful mugs of wine to welcome the New Year, they uttered passionate words on behalf of their sweethearts, swearing to rescue them at any cost from the clutches of the Nazis, and to exact stern vengeance for their sufferings.

No alarm was sounded that night and no encounter with the enemy took place. But the following field order was received :

'All commanders of the tank battalion must wear white cloaks, put on skis, take hand-grenades and automatics and go on reconnaissance at night.'

CHAPTER VIII

THE MARCH ACROSS THE ICE

FROM the south alone five rivers carry their waters into Lake Ilmen. These rivers, which are from 75 yards to over a quarter of a mile wide, absorb scores of tributary streams. The lake and the estuaries of the rivers flowing into it form the best possible natural cover for troops

on the defensive. Since the autumn, this excellent natural defence line had been in the hands of the Germans, and so long as they had the use of it they could continue to blockade Leningrad. During the winter months the Nazis had been able to erect quite a number of artificial fortifications here—strong-points, trenches, wire entanglements; they had set up mine fields and stationed trench mortars and artillery batteries there. An area of hundreds of square miles south of the lake had been converted into a powerful defence zone.

"This is the very reason why I invited you tankmen to leave your beloved caterpillar tanks for 24 hours and put on skis in order to make a raid far behind the enemy's lines"—so said the commander of the unit to which our tank battalion had been attached in order to carry out a reconnaissance.

During the past 24 hours the tankmen, on skis, led by their commander, Major Maximov, had made an extensive scouting trek. Wearing their white camouflage suits they had covered about 25 miles, penetrating not only far into the hoar-covered forest along the shores of the lake, but right onto the lake itself. Very quietly, so as not to attract the attention of the enemy, they had bored holes into the ice to measure its thickness and fathom the depth of the lake. Now, after a day's rest, they received the field orders for which they had been waiting so impatiently.

The plan of operations was as follows : All tank battalions were to make a night attack across Lake Ilmen and its tributaries, penetrate the enemy's defence line to a depth of from 17 to 25 miles and then, together with the infantry, make a sudden flanking attack on the main Nazi force in the Staraya Russa area. The aim was to surround the 290th Infantry Division and the S.S. 'Death's Head' Division both forming part of the 16th German Army.

As darkness fell the engines of the tanks began to roar and our battalion left its temporary quarters. Our five 'K.V.s' started off with a racket that made the earth quiver. You could hear the rattling of the window panes of the houses in the neighbouring village and the rending, moaning sounds of the tree trunks as the tanks crashed against them. A blizzard was raging and it conveniently hid our advance as we moved up to the starting point of the attack. Our last stop before the attack was at the outskirts of a village. The situation was very tense. If only the little rivers would behave themselves and not thwart the first stage of our advance! We must cross them without fail and keep our tanks in first class fighting trim for getting to grips with the enemy.

Astakhov made his final inspection of the tanks. "How's your machine?" he asked each of the crews. In every case the answer was a firm, confident 'O.K.'

The tarpaulins had been removed from guns and machine-guns, shells were ready and cartridge drums mounted. There was always a chance that the enemy might discover what was in the wind sooner than we intended, and then we should have to start fighting whether we liked it or not.

The tank column was accompanied by infantry landing units. Squads of sappers were to ride on the leading tanks. Their job was to render the anti-tank mines harmless.

"Landing troops—Action Stations!" The words of command, passed along from tank to tank, could barely be heard for the raging of the blizzard.

The ghostly outlines of the tanks, both heavy and light, seemed suddenly to change and swell—acquiring new forms; these were the members of the landing party in their snow-white overalls with tommy guns, also painted white, slung over their shoulders, who had taken their places on the tanks.

Now the column of tanks was on the move. In spite of the darkness it was easy to distinguish the silhouettes of the huge 'K.V.s' from other machines. With a gigantic clanging and crunching of their tracks, the long line of steel fortresses rumbled forward into the black-and-white night.

A six mile dash brought us to the shores of the age-old Russian lake of Ilmen, whose relatively shallow waters are always teeming with fish, and especially since the war, when there were no fishermen, even at the height of the season. Now, in mid-winter, the lake was frozen through, almost to the bottom.

The heavy tank on which I was riding alongside our tommy gunners lumbered forward cautiously, its tracks biting firmly into the ice. At a given command we jumped down and walked alongside the tank. Old Ilmen, as if displeased with this sudden disturbance of his nightly rest, was creaking and groaning like an ancient oak assailed by a storm. Never before had the ice had to bear such a load—each 50 ton tank entailed a weight of over 400 pounds per square centimetre. On all sides you could hear the soft, tinkling crackle of the ice, warping under the tanks. In places where the lake was not frozen right through to the bottom, you could see ice sinking down under the weight of a heavy tank, like a spring mattress. When this happened the heavy tanks behind were not allowed to follow in the tracks of the leading machine, but had to fan out, each taking its own route across the surface of the lake.

We had got safely across the lake and were confronted by a river crossing bordering on the German fortified area. Owing to the current, the ice here was much thinner than on the lake and the tanks could not get across without special precautions.

Only a few minutes before we arrived, the tankmen of a neighbouring unit had paid a heavy price for disregarding the need for such precautions. One of their heavy tanks had crashed through the ice in midstream where the river was about 100 yards wide. The tank went to the bottom but fortunately the crew managed to get out through the hatch.

Quite unintentionally our pioneers had let us down. They were to have provided 2,000 logs which were to be strewn across the ice and frozen together; but we had got across Lake Ilmen so far ahead of schedule that the logs had not yet arrived.

There was not a moment to lose. It was midnight. In a few hours it would be dawn. The enemy's air force would spot us and we would still be marking time at the first crossing. The main thing was to force this river crossing as rapidly as possible, as it formed the outer wall of the Nazi defence zone. Once we had smashed through this wall we could trundle along as we pleased.

There were no logs, only the holes which had been bored in the ice through which to pump up water to freeze the logs together when they arrived. Now these dumb, black holes in the smooth surface of the ice only aroused the fury of the tankmen. What was the use of these infernal holes now, when there were no logs? Maybe they would do for some foolish wolf of the forest to stick in his tail to catch fish, following the cunning advice of the fox in the fable! I was not the only one who wished that the chief of the pioneer unit were in the position of that wolf in the fable whose tail was eventually frozen solid.

Every minute that passed the danger of the collapse of all our carefully laid plans became more imminent. Then, once again, necessity proved the mother of invention. Suddenly Major Maximov suggested to the head of the pioneer detachment: "Let's tear down the nearest village and use the timber of its huts to floor the ice."

"How shall we get the timber here?"

"We'll use our tanks."

No sooner said than done. An hour and a half later the tanks had towed up a whole trainload of beams from the nearest village. The pioneers were overjoyed at this unexpected way out of the dilemma. Now they were in their element. Skilfully and enthusiastically they set about flooring the ice. Neatly and compactly they hammered beam to beam, as if they wanted to preserve the mutual proximity in which they had lived for scores of years, while constituting the walls and floors of the homes of peaceful Soviet citizens. We felt really sorry to have to tear up these warm, cosy nests that had been the habitations of collective farmers, but it could not be helped. It was the only means for us to pave our way to victory. By taking apart the houses of one village, we meant to wrest scores and hundreds of villages away from the Germans.

The icy water, sucked gurgling up by the pump, was already rapidly freezing up the old cracks, together with such odds and ends as a good housewife's needle and cotton that she had stuck into the wall and forgotten, and pieces of florid tapestry and newspaper which the occupants of the huts had once upon a time carefully pasted on the walls. Soon our pavement across the ice was ready.

One after another the small and medium tanks negotiated the river, the huge 'K.V.s' lumbered carefully in their wake. We got across without being spotted by the Germans. Everything went smoothly. We stopped to lend a hand with the neighbouring unit's tank which had gone under. Four of our heavies took it in tow, and at the given signal thousands of horse-power got going and the 50 ton tank was yanked out of the bottom of the river.

A mountain of steel emerged from the water, hurling up a heap of ice as it clambered ashore. The river looked as if it had been split in two by a gigantic battering ram. When the tank at last crawled out on the bank it looked like a monster of the ice age, with stalagmite and stalactite excrescences and a trunk of ice instead of a gun.

The tank was saved, although covered with ice it was not frozen. After it had been warmed up for two hours the engine started to hum and soon the tank was in full working order again. Its crew, who a few hours ago had been on the verge of death, now bustled around their machine, triumphant and exhilarated. "She's proof against fire and water," they said delightedly.

The rescued tank was also a splendid testimonial to the excellent workmanship of those who had built it. Engineer Novotortsev of the Tank Centre could be justly proud of both the tank and his pupils, the men who had made such a good job of extracting it from the ice.

Now our column was on the move again, through forest and marshes. The sky was growing light as we approached the second river crossing, still unnoticed by the enemy. The pioneers were full of fighting spirit. They brought up logs for the crossing on their shoulders, carrying them long distances over very rough going. After a short interval another wooden flooring was ready for our tanks. By now it was full daylight. When the Germans finally awoke they rubbed their eyes in astonishment as they saw a whole column of tanks with infantry riding on them, winding its way through the valleys that formed the Nazi defence line.

The Nazi artillery relied exclusively on their infantry look-outs, but that night these had failed to give the alarm. They had been wiped out by the ski battalion of our contingent without firing a shot.

After crossing the river we continued to outflank the enemy. The Germans could not understand where the tanks had come from. They did not think it could have been possible for them to get across Lake Ilmen and negotiate two more rivers. No wonder they were astonished. But whether they believed their eyes or not, their guns had to describe a ninety degrees angle to the left before they could open fire.

Now the first shells were bursting over our crossing. "Close hatches! Watch the enemy!" Astakhov ordered his men. Meanwhile our tommy gunners took cover behind the tanks. Although the Germans must have had the range of every inch of the locality thoroughly taped for weeks, their fire, as the result of the fright we had given them, was very inaccurate. Our pioneers, who at first had scattered in different directions, now ran back to the crossing to help with the remaining tanks.

Astakhov's tank was already on the opposite side. But now the shells and mines of the enemy were dropping closer and closer to the wooden flooring over the ice. Some of the pioneers were wounded but none of them left their post. They went on hammering back into

place any logs that had been jerked out. I could tell by the explosions that the Germans were directing a devastating cross-fire on this vital spot. The crossing seemed to be doomed. Crash! two heavy shells burst right on the logs, sending two huge fountains of water and fragments of ice and making the entire crossing shudder.

Nobody was killed but I saw two shell-shocked pioneers swimming frantically in two of the gaping holes in the ice trying to keep afloat. Comrades ran up to their rescue and pulled them out of their icy bath. Then a new explosion dinned our ears, but this proved to be a salvo fired by Astakhov's tank which had succeeded in locating the nearest enemy battery and started to pound away at it. Two or three other tanks followed suit and the battery was soon silenced.

Under the direction of their commander, Ivanov, the pioneers rushed to fix the crossing. They dragged the logs along the ice and made a new crossing. I ran up to the wounded pioneers who had been laid down near one of the tanks. Their uniforms, frozen stiff by the 40 degree frost as soon as they were pulled out of the water, wrapped them in a rigid armour of ice. Their clothes were frozen into a solid mass together with their camouflage cloaks. I was confronted by two white sarcophagi of ice from which showed two human faces.

An army surgeon and various medical personnel were bustling about the wounded men, hacking off the frozen uniforms with sappers' shovels. I could see by their clenched teeth and drawn faces that they were suffering great pain, but it was absolutely necessary to free them immediately from the layers of ice in which they were encased in order to prevent any further loss of blood, which was still oozing from their wounded arms and legs. It was still flowing in such quantities, seeping through their clothes, that it thawed up the ice and dyed it a deep red with a tinge of gold.

By the time the last tank had made the new crossing and was lumbering along the further shore, the wounded pioneers were already well taken care of. Battalion Commissar Kharchenko made a note of their names : Malushin and Yeremin. "Never mind, boys," he said, as he saw them off to the rear, "you get well and there'll be another chance for you to show what you're made of. Thanks for getting us across. And when we settle accounts with the enemy we won't forget what they did to you!"

Astakhov's fire had silenced the enemy batteries so effectively that in half an hour we were again moving through a new swamp and even approaching a third crossing, still without a sound from the German artillery.

In the forest the familiar front-line symphony was being performed. Our advanced infantry detachments had begun to engage the enemy, attacking him sharply from flank and rear with machine-gun and automatic-rifle fire.

The third crossing was easy but it provided a beautiful example of a neat stratagem.

When we arrived at the place agreed upon with the pioneers, we found

no signs whatever of any wooden pavement, as it had been very cleverly camouflaged. Meanwhile a Nazi bomber appeared in the sky. We were ordered to take cover in the forest snow drifts and to remain there stock-still until the Nazi bird of prey had done its work. About half-a-mile away from the real crossing the pioneers had laid out a dummy crossing of branches and brushwood, and sure enough it was the dummy that the enemy plane bombed. When pilot Fritz, obviously delighted at his 'feat,' flew home, our battalion made one grand dash across this third water barrier under cover of artillery fire. The heavy machines were stoutly borne up by the timber road that had been artfully concealed under a heavy sprinkling of snow.

Followed a march of about five miles through miry swamp land. I may as well mention here that for tanks any bog, no matter how low the temperature, may prove as sticky in winter as in summer, for the layer of snow and moss prevents compact icing.

The light scouting tanks experienced some difficulty in negotiating the barely frozen tussocks and one medium tank at once sank right up to its turret into the bog, churning up heaps of peat all around.

The tank was dragged out and a new route was hastily sought. On one side the bog trailed away to some woods. If we could lay a road through them all the battalion could move forward rapidly.

"Stamping the forest into the ground and laying a road for the battalion, eh?—I think your mammoths are perfectly equal to the job," said Major Maximov, turning to Astakhov. "What do you say?"

"Will you let me reconnoitre the ground?" Astakhov said.

"Go right ahead," said Maximov.

Astakhov, accompanied by the drivers of his five tanks, doubled off to the woods. The willows and young pines measuring 10 to 15 centimetres in diameter roused no misgivings in the minds of the experienced drivers.

Dormidontov turned to Tenditny, the driver of his tank. "Crash through them?" he said casually.

"Yes, crash through them and pound them in," Tenditny said. "The babies will follow behind; it'll be as good as a main road."

Astakhov's tank led the column. The wood was fairly dense. At first sight it looked to be bristling with tree trunks that made it impenetrable for tanks. But, as Dormidontov said afterwards, this proved to be a sheer 'wooden illusion.'

The tracks of the heavy 'K.V.s' trampled down the thicket as if it were a wicker fence. Soon a road was laid. Already we glimpsed a further water barrier in the distance. It was about 300 yards wide with steep banks about 60 feet high in places. Here the Germans were not caught unawares. On the further shore they offered fierce resistance to our infantry detachments in the van. The fire from mortars and tommy guns was deafening. But the Nazis had not yet learnt our full strength.

They were now to experience what the powerful guns of our tanks could do at close range.

Major Maximov ordered his battalion to deploy ready for an attack against the enemy, and to open fire across the river.

"Lt. Astakhov," he said, "you remain on this bank and take my place. Direct your fire so as to cover my deployment!"

The major himself, with his group of light tanks, rushed in extended order across the ice to the further shore without any artificial crossing whatever.

The Germans were thunderstruck by the sudden appearance of the Soviet tanks which seemed to have risen from under the ice. Our tank crews could clearly see the panic that reigned in the nearest block-houses along the bank. The Germans' fire died away. At the same time Maximov, together with Fetlikhin's and Maslov's sections, was already crushing down the first Nazi lines of resistance. Astakhov's guns gave excellent support to Maximov's tanks as they crossed the river and broke into the German defences. Meanwhile the pioneers were engaged in hammering together a new layer of logs as the battalion commander had now radioed the heavy tanks to come across.

Twilight came on. Under enemy fire, but without losing a single man or machine, we crossed the fourth river. We had been fighting continuously for a whole day. Nobody had eaten anything yet, or even thought about eating. The main thing was to get entrenched in the new line. The Germans were already leaving their dug-outs and abandoning their guns and killed in order to take up new defensive positions.

The group commander ordered us to take a little rest, or rather, to be more accurate, to get ready for a fresh fierce engagement, which meant replenishing our supplies of fuel and ammunition.

The tank crews climbed out of their machines. I could not have recognized a single one of them. Their faces were so smeared and begrimed that they looked blacker than their helmets. The lads were fatigued, their tired eyelids drooped down, but each one of them spurned the very thought of taking a rest.

Gunner Zharchenko was pulling soot-covered shell cases out of their containers. Dormidontov nudged the driver of a petrol tank lorry who was just dozing off, to make him rush the refuelling, at the same time repriming him for indulging in 'the illusion of sleep.'

However, we managed to get a couple of hours' rest somehow. The tankmen fully deserved it both on account of the 25 mile roadless, icebound course they had traversed, their raid far behind the Nazi lines and the drubbing they had given the Nazi invaders. In my opinion they had put up a very fine show indeed; this advance of heavy tanks across relatively thinly iced river barriers was a hitherto unprecedented feat.

To-morrow would bring new and still more desperate fighting, against an enemy who, though resisting stubbornly, had already suffered severe reverses at our hands.

CHAPTER IX

FIRST BATTLES—FIRST BOOTY

THREE miles ahead of us was the terminus railway station and the village of Yuryevo. This was sure to be one of the Nazi strong-points which had to be taken at any cost.

A water barrier was again the chief obstacle to be overcome. A 450 yard wide river flowed past the village, making the fifth river in our path.

At dawn the battalion was all set to deploy for action. The tanks still kept under cover in the thickets and the oak wood along the river's bank. Our orders were to support the neighbouring formations on our left, whose objective coincided with ours.

We reconnoitred very early. The blizzard that had raged the day before was no longer blinding our eyes. A bright moon was shining; the frost had become more intense. Cloaks of downy hoar frost adorned the oak trees and the occasional pines. They looked as if they were dressed for a masquerade.

Leaving our tanks in their hiding places we crept off on foot through the early morning fog to the bank of the river. Through our field glasses we saw on the opposite bank the hazy outlines of logs and beams that were intended to seem like the left-overs of last autumn's lumber work. We assumed that these fortifications were partly real, partly sham. A couple of tall, recently built water towers reared their heads skyward. They were used as observation posts. Barely perceptible streaks of mist coming from under the soil and in the steep gullies of the opposite shore betrayed the breathing of the Nazis in their dug-outs and timbered earthworks.

I looked at the swarthy, elongated face of Major Maximov. He had taken his field glasses away from his eyes and was now looking sideways rather nonchalantly. Suddenly his grey eyes blazed up as if with some inner fire and he said in a determined tone:

"Let's go."

We stole back to the tanks. The major had made his decision:

"We'll ask the artillery to give us a morning concert, to smash up all these rat holes and knock down the observation towers," he said. "We'll attack the bank with our light and medium tanks without any logging; we made out quite well that way last night."

Major Maximov, a very brave and resolute commander, obviously intended to go into the attack himself in one of the leading tanks. He left Commissar Kharchenko to come along with the heavies.

Our artillery opened heavy fire on the opposite bank, as arranged, and under cover of this barrage, the tanks, with infantry riding on them, rushed from their forest hide-out to the sheet of ice that spanned the river.

The Nazis had laid anti-tank mines along the ice. We called these 'pancakes' because of their shape. Just before the attack started, Major Maximov had warned the tank crews:

"Don't eat too many 'pancakes'." The Germans had had no time to lay the mines underground or freeze them into the ice; they had left them scattered about on the surface. They had never dreamt that our tanks would appear at this spot.

The sappers who rode on the tanks jumped down on to the ice and boldly moved aside the green discs of explosives.

The Germans tried to supplement the minefield with heavy artillery and trench mortar fire aimed directly at the frozen river, but their mines and shells did not pierce the thick layer of ice. The tanks, which acted as cover for the infantry, continued their dash toward the opposite bank. The Germans now played their last card—bombing from the air. Five Junkers planes were already approaching to do the job.

We saw the heavy bombs dropping one after the other on the ice. Followed ear-splitting explosions that made the whole bank shake and tremble. Nevertheless the tanks were able to make good use of the intervals between bombs and sped across skilfully manoeuvring among the holes and the mines. They could already be seen clambering up the opposite bank. Only one medium tank suffered from the Nazi vultures and even this did not get a direct hit. The bomb exploded a few yards ahead of the tank. A regular geyser descended on the machine and blinded the tank crew. The driver had had no time to turn the tank aside and it plunged into the crater in the ice. Even so only its tail end went under water and the whole crew escaped safe and sound.

On the further bank a hotly contested engagement between our tanks and the enemy's anti-tank arms followed. We were now facing the Germans' last and most important line in their powerful system of fortifications on this sector of the front. The enemy was extremely reluctant to surrender it. From both station and village came showers of artillery, trench mortar and machine-gun fire.

The entire stretch of a mile and a quarter between the river and the village was an intricate web of mines, barbed wire entanglements and block-houses. All these destructive agencies spat fire and death at us, but the tanks, together with the infantry, pressed on irresistibly, outflanking the Nazi stronghold on both sides.

Some of our tanks in the van which had struck mines or been hit by shells came to a standstill or spun around helplessly. It was a pity our 'K.V.s' were not there yet. With their armour they could have afforded to pooh-pooh those 'pancake' mines and anti-tank shells. The river and the enemy air force were still barring our road. As yet, we were not 'carrying all sail,' as sailors would say; we had not engaged our full fighting strength with the Germans.

Even so, our five 'K.V.s' justified their appellation of 'Mammoths' in the eyes of the Nazis, and kept up a devastating bombardment of the German defences.



Marshal Voroshilov.

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Lankmen's Morning Bath.

The battle lasted the whole day. During this time our anti-aircraft gunners brought down two enemy bombers, after which the remainder kept away at a safe distance. At 6 p.m. Major Maximov, supported by the fire of the whole tank battalion, and with infantry and sappers mounted on the tanks, rushed the village and station where their tommy guns, bayonets and hand-grenades paralysed the last remnants of Nazi resistance. Our boys had won the day. Both station and village were in our hands. Now the heavy tanks moved up to the battalion across a newly-crested log pavement.

From holes under the ground, from behind snow drifts, from the heart of the woods the local inhabitants came running up to us.

"So our boys have come despite everything," they said, and wept for joy.

Hardly any menfolk were to be seen among them—only women with little children, ragged, emaciated, and begrimed with the clayey soil in which they had lived so long.

Most of the houses remained intact and the women gradually scattered to their hearths and homes. At the extreme edge of the village, at the spot where we entered it, a heap of ashes was all that was left of a former hut. The fire brands were still smoking. A woman, sobbing and trembling all over, was sitting on a pile of bricks, her head buried in her hands. Five little children were nestling close to her. The eldest of them, a girl of ten, held a baby in her arms and was trying to calm her mother. The remaining three, with the unconcern of their age, were alternately scampering about in the ash heap and warming themselves at a little bonfire which they carefully kept alive by blowing on it. One small boy had a baked potato in his hand. He had salvaged it from among the bricks.

I walked up to the woman, intending to have a talk with her. Startled, she raised her head. I saw the white, tear-stained, grief-stricken face of a woman of Novgorod.

"Did you live here?" I asked.

"Yes, but I haven't been here for three months," she said in a low voice.

"How was that?" I said.

"We were driven out by the Germans. My hut was the very last and brought us a lot of bad luck. They put a gun inside it. They said it was to protect the village."

I saw regular mountains of shell cases around the debris of this hut and there were more German corpses here than anywhere else. The Nazis had turned the hut into their main defence bastion. I remembered that our fire from across the river had been concentrated precisely on this part of the village edge. The German artillerymen stationed here had been blown into the air by their own shells which we had exploded. The building was absolutely wrecked, but that could not be helped—war is war. We had already had to take logs and beams from the collective-farm houses to effect a crossing over the ice and get into the rear of the enemy. And it was through the smoking ashes of this woman's hut that we had forced our way into an

entire village and freed it of the Nazi fiends; and we would go on liberating more and more villages. Millions of women and children, including even this very woman, would be thankful to us for this.

She herself said: "I realize you had to do it." She was well aware of who was really to blame for wrecking her home.

We went with her and her children to the nearest warm house. A few tankmen had already collected there. As conversation got under way I found out a bit more about her. She told me that her husband was in the army.

The face of Alexandra Borissova—this was her name—was now full of determination, which had displaced the grief and impotence that possessed her when I first met her in the open. Her eyes flashed with anger. Only her shoulders twitched from time to time as if from some internal convulsion.

She had four children of her own: Zena, aged ten; Valentina—seven, with a bandaged right hand, wounded during a German bombardment; Tanya, who was five; and Vova, a baby of three. The fifth child, Sima, was a boy of about eight whom she had adopted.

For seven months this unfortunate family had been experiencing the full weight of the war let loose by the Nazis. Three months ago she was driven out of her own home and even suffered persecution as the wife of a Red Armyman. Hungry and cold, mother and children had roamed about the neighbouring villages, living in earth huts in the woods. She fed like a reindeer dam that gets provender for herself and her young from under the snow. She would burrow in snow-covered sheaves of grain that had been left in the fields, grind the grain she gleaned, and thus obtain a bare minimum of sustenance.

It was in this dire distress that Alexandra Borissova came across Sima, a waif who was dying of starvation. Her mother's heart quivered with pity. She added him to her family and he had been like one of her own ever since.

Sima, who had fair hair and beautiful hazel-brown eyes, was now engaged in a lively conversation with the tankmen while at the same time dividing up among the girls the baked potato that he had found.

Sima's father had been killed in the Finnish campaign; his mother had perished as the result of a Nazi air raid. He was from Staraya Russa. His nearest relative was his maternal grandmother who lived in one of the nearby towns.

"What's your grandmother's name, sonny?" I asked Sima.

"Grandmother."

"No, I mean her first and second name."

Sima became confused and started to frown.

"Grandmother!" he mumbled in a low voice, his perplexity increasing.

As we took leave of the dispossessed family I shook hands with this courageous woman, this real Soviet mother who was so devotedly tending her five nurslings. The tankmen shared their sugar, toasted bread and buckwheat with the children who could not thank them

enough for this godsend. To the mother we gave our word of honour as Red Army men that her hut would be rebuilt.

"We'll come ourselves and build it," one of the tankmen said.

When we had gone out into the village street Sima came running up bareheaded.

"Say, uncle, can I be a tankman?" he asked eagerly.

"Of course you can," I said, "only you are too young yet. They won't take you in the army."

"Yes, they will," he said, "all my uncles are in the Red Army."

"What, your uncles?" It was now my turn to ask. "Why have you kept quiet about this all the time?"

"They're my mother's brothers: Uncle Lenya, Uncle Vanya, Uncle Vassya, Uncle Kirya and Uncle Andrusha," Sima said.

"And their second names?"

"Timofeyev, all of them."

So that must also be the name of his grandmother.

"All right, then, Sima," I said, "get ready to join the Red Army. Only first we'll have to find your uncles."

Everywhere in the village we came across the traces of cruel tyranny practised by the brutal Nazis. Constantin Popov, a collective farmer and a perfectly innocent man, had been shot before the eyes of the whole population. Elizaveta Afanasyeva was publicly flogged because her children had been playing in the street with cartridges they had found.

Now all these atrocities committed by Hitler's fiendish minions were over. Thousands of Soviet citizens had regained their freedom. Proudly our tank crews and infantrymen walked around their machines, surrounded on all sides by compatriots, collective farmers. With loathing they looked at the distorted German corpses that were lying all over the place.

Some time later an account was given of the battalion's work in the capture of this village and railway station of Yuryevo. Here are some of the most interesting figures in that report: Germans killed, 140; battalion headquarters of the 502nd Rifle Regiment completely wiped out. All documents seized. Captured: 14 guns of various types, in good condition; 93 automatic rifles; 297 ordinary rifles, 11 mortars, 7 anti-tank rifles, 60 lorries, 9 motorcycles, 39 horses; 3 station warehouses containing ammunition, army clothing and food supplies.

Such were the results of our first encounter with the Nazis.

CHAPTER X

THE 'MAMMOTHS' GO INTO ACTION

Now that the last link in the enemy defences had been broken every single moment was more precious than ever; the enemy had to be

entire village and freed it of the Nazi fiends; and we would go on liberating more and more villages. Millions of women and children, including even this very woman, would be thankful to us for this.

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Everywhere in the village we came across the traces of cruel tyranny practised by the brutal Nazis. Constantin Popov, a collective farmer and a perfectly innocent man, had been shot before the eyes of the whole population. Elizaveta Afanasyeva was publicly flogged because her children had been playing in the street with cartridges they had found.

Now all these atrocities committed by Hitler's fiendish minions were over. Thousands of Soviet citizens had regained their freedom. Proudly our tank crews and infantrymen walked around their machines, surrounded on all sides by compatriots, collective farmers. With loathing they looked at the distorted German corpses that were lying all over the place.

Some time later an account was given of the battalion's work in the capture of this village and railway station of Yuryevo. Here are some of the most interesting figures in that report: Germans killed, 140; battalion headquarters of the 502nd Rifle Regiment completely wiped out. All documents seized. Captured: 14 guns of various types, in good condition; 93 automatic rifles; 297 ordinary rifles, 11 mortars, 7 anti-tank rifles, 60 lorries, 9 motorcycles, 39 horses; 3 station warehouses containing ammunition, army clothing and food supplies.

Such were the results of our first encounter with the Nazis.

CHAPTER X

THE 'MAMMOTHS' GO INTO ACTION

Now that the last link in the enemy defences had been broken every single moment was more precious than ever; the enemy had to be

pursued without a halt and not be given an instant's respite. But we also had to consider every drop of petrol, every bullet and shell, to make sure that we had enough supplies to continue the advance.

This was what held us up. The petrol-tank lorries and the ammunition were still at the last crossing, and were expected to come up at any moment.

We met the supplies for the tanks on the road. The men were used to doing everything by touch, however dark it might be. And now, with sure movements, they drew out the petrol hoses, unscrewed the caps, packed the heavy shells into the ammunition containers. It was all done with remarkable speed and skill. Each man wanted to take more than the next one, to beat his comrade. No child was ever so eager to receive biscuits, chocolates or sweets as these men were to get the ammunition.

"What's the matter with you—can't you bear to part with another shell for a German?" demanded Tank Commander Kalinichev, in charge of the ammunition distribution.

It seemed as if the men of the 'K.V.' tanks were grabbing the ammunition with especial eagerness, as though they had never set eyes on a shell before. They wanted to stuff them inside their shirts—anywhere. Solovyov, Kalinichev's loader, stood in a bit of a fix nursing two shells in his arms, like twins—he had nowhere to put them. . . .

The tankmen waited impatiently for a really stiff fight.

Major Maximov gave the commanders of the crews a talk, explaining their fighting task: the Germans had fled to the next village, S. But evidently there they had been halted by fresh reserve troops flung in to assist them, and now they were preparing for the defence. Our immediate job was to smash their defence and push them back still further.

Once again, in the opening stage of the battle, Astakhov's tanks advanced in the second wave. As the battle developed it would soon become clear where the 'K.V.'s would be most useful.

Shortly before dawn, completely hidden and surrounded by infantry and automatic riflemen in their white camouflage overalls, the white 'Mammoth' tanks and baby tanks moved into battle.

There was a clear field in front of the village, and here the Germans met us with a barrage of anti-tank artillery fire. The first explosions of the enemy shells were the signal for our tanks to fan out.

I followed the course of the battle from the observation post of an infantry commander; already a well-aimed shot from a German gun had sliced off the turret of one of the forward small tanks and two more had had their caterpillar-tracks damaged. Encouraged by this initial success, the Germans intensified their mortar and automatic rifle fire against our infantry. Our men flung themselves to the ground and the tanks tried to de-concentrate.

The slight hesitation in our ranks became too evident to escape observation from the enemy, and when our tanks rushed forward, with the infantry following in their wake, the Germans smothered

them with a terrific hail of shells and mines, isolating them from the infantry. Then, with yells and shrieks, the German companies counter-attacked.

Two green rockets soared into the air—the long-awaited signal had come at last—the call for the 'K.V.' tanks.

Suddenly the very earth seemed to shudder and the air to tremble with the roar of the 'K.V.' engines. From behind the wood near the road the tank fortresses thrust forward in broad formation. The Germans sent up a hurricane of dense fire, but without the slightest effect—the armoured land cruisers advanced relentlessly through the sea of fire.

Our infantry, too, was encouraged. Under cover of the steel shield of the tanks, which had now overtaken them, they started advancing in waves. The white lid of the hatch flew up on Astakhov's right-flank machine, and a red flag fluttered three times: 'Machine No. 3 to break into the village.'

Machine No. 3—Lt. Chilikin's—suddenly became enveloped in the black smoke of a rich petrol mixture, and the roar of the engine in top gear reached our ears. With the ease and mobility of a whippet tank this powerful steel fortress rushed full out in a frontal attack against the Germans.

Through my powerful field-glasses I could clearly see the dumb-founded German artillerymen scattering in all directions. Up till now they had been doing all the firing, and scoring the hits, but suddenly here came this invincible monster, hurtling down on them before their very eyes, and which at any moment would crush them beneath its weight. And the tank did in actual fact break through the village boundary road, then, swerving to the right, began crushing the Fascist anti-tank guns and those remaining members of their crews hiding in the ditches, who had hoped to escape.

There now roared in our ears not the thunder of the exploding enemy mines and shells but the thunder of our own tanks' guns firing against ever new enemy points. Every now and then Chilikin's machine would flash behind a house or some trees. We could even see the inscription on the turret: 'Happy New Year!' The good wishes of the workers were quickly bearing fruit!

"The workers have wished us a happy new year—we'll soon find you new graves, you lousy Fritzes!"

With ever-increasing frequency the inscriptions—"Happy New Year!" on one side of the tank turrets and 'For the Motherland! For Stalin!' on the other—flashed over the battlefield. Our tanks had broken into the positions of the German infantry who had only so recently tried to counter-attack; now these positions were being ironed out from flank to flank and those bandits who had failed to escape were being remorselessly crushed into the snow.

Fifteen minutes later all five 'K.V.' tanks had broken into the village where, together with the infantry, they battered the remaining Germans who had taken cover in attics and barns. Another fifteen minutes, and we were all inside this newly recaptured village. The

tanks continued to pursue the enemy. The terrified Germans fled towards their own rear before the onslaught of our machines.

In the next two villages no resistance whatever was put up against our tanks and they rolled through them in a triumphant procession. All that could be heard was the hollow distant rumble of short bursts from tank machine-guns and occasional single shots—our men putting an end to fascist stragglers evidently overloaded with loot.

The next morning we made another 15 kilometres' advance. Our tanks were nearing a large populated place and a railway junction. It was clear that the Germans would defend both these points with especial determination, even at the approaches. Our reconnaissance patrols also reported a strong anti-tank defence belt in this locality.

Astakhov glowed with the excitement of the recent battle.

"At least I've straightened my shoulders a bit, and done a spot of real work," he remarked with great satisfaction.

Efimov, Chilikin, Kalinichov, Gomozov—the commanders of the other tanks—were just as satisfied and triumphant as they drew up for a brief halt. The crews flung open the hatches wide to show their grimy mugs and broad grins of satisfaction to the world and to exchange cheery greetings with pals in the next machine.

"Hi, there, Gene!" came a powerful shout from the leading hatch—Konstantinov to Dormidontov. "Tell us something about the German illusions."

"No illusions—only contusions," said Dormidontov quickly. His crack was received with a laugh.

In turn, Dormidontov asked Konstantinov:

"How's the engine going?"

"Fine."

"Mine's O.K. too."

While still on the move the company was given a new and very important task to carry out: L. village had to be encircled in a pincer grip; without engaging the enemy there, they were to advance a further five kilometres and capture the main railway line and highway, along which columns of German reinforcements were already being rushed up.

Major Maximov climbed into one of the 'K.V.s'. His job was to outflank the village from the left with two tanks, while Astakhov with three more would converge from the right. They were to join up on the road beyond the village, in the rear of the Germans.

The village turned out to be a veritable fortress of earth and timber fortifications, each one with powerful firing equipment ranging from machine-guns to large-calibre mortars and field guns.

"A hard nut to crack. We might break our teeth on a frontal assault. The tankmen themselves have suggested the best alternative," commented the infantry officer at the command post.

The outflanking idea, so simple in itself, turned out to have emanated from Maximov and Astakhov. Nothing could be more

plain—the simultaneous capture of a couple of enemy lines of communication of army importance would be tantamount to tapping an artery in a living organism. With this object in view it was permissible to sacrifice even the most immediate and elementary task—the blocking of the village. The other tanks of the battalion would see to that, but even so solely for the purpose of drawing the enemy into battle and distracting him from the outflanking machines.

From the very outset the fighting was fierce. On our side it was in the nature of a demonstration; on the German side there was an animal fear of the tanks and a last convulsive effort to bar the road to our offensive at all costs. The German anti-tank artillery set up a regular wall of solid fire. Shrieking and whistling, the shells exploded on a small open square, with scarcely a yard between each one. A terrific artillery duel took place between the guns fired from our tanks and the German anti-tank guns.

Meanwhile, our most important task, the penetration by the heavy tanks into the German rear, was being carried out quite unobtrusively.

The first radio signal report came in—"Village by-passed, advancing further."

These signals, together with the reports coming in from the infantry chiefs, enabled us to follow the development of events uninterruptedly, which took place in the following order:

The artillery in a certain village to the right of the road struck with full force against all five 'K.V.' tanks. This was a surprise for our tankmen. Immediately to engage the enemy in battle would mean renouncing the fulfilment of the task, which was of vital importance to a whole army. Once again, Major Maximov and Astakhov split up: two machines went ahead under command of the major, the three remaining tanks commanded by Astakhov were to reduce the village which hindered the advance.

A fierce engagement ensued with the artillery. The gun commanders of all our machines, having turned the turrets right handed, fired at the enemy block-houses with the force of practically a whole battery. But tanks can do more than strike, they can also crush.

"Forward!" commanded Astakhov, waving his signal-flag, and the three tanks hurtled against the village for the final crushing of the Germans.

While still on the move they fired their guns and machine-guns against the enemy firing positions. But there suddenly appeared, like a plague of locusts, small groups of infantry tank-destroyers who flung themselves against the tanks from the manholes by the roadside. Some let off rockets into the spy-holes so as to blind the crews, others carried heavy cases of explosives on their backs. These men were evidently the "infantry shock-detachments."

Several bursts of machine-gun fire were directed against the tank-destroyers and immediately half of them were wiped out. But still the vermin crept forward right up to our tanks, out of range of our machine-guns because they were so close. Then the tankmen started to hurl their 'lemons'—the hand-grenades—out of the hatches, and

these quickly cleared away all the vermin from the ground around the machines.

Not even in the height of the battle did the men forget about helping one another. When one of the tank-destroyer swine succeeded in climbing onto Astakhov's tank, Kalinichev's radio-operator Shishov sent such a beautifully-placed burst of machine-gun fire into him that, to use the words of the crew themselves: the German "seemed to have been licked off the tank by the flick of a cow's tongue."

All three mammoths continued to thrust forward with determination and vigour, crushing into the deep snow those fascists who were unable to run fast enough. Their corpses lined the path over which the tanks had passed like sleepers on a railroad.

And here were the pill-boxes themselves, and the anti-tank guns. They were crushed beneath the steel claws of the white monsters like rotten apples. After flattening three or four pill-boxes each, plus the dozens of fascists inside them, the tanks set out to overtake the other two machines.

These two machines had made good progress; one might almost say they had over-reached themselves in their advance. Crossing the railroad, they sped on for another seven kilometres along the highway. In the meantime the Germans had rushed up nearly a full regiment of mechanized infantry. Seeing the approaching tanks the fascists never dreamt of stopping them, mistaking them from this distance for their own.

"Veer left!" Mazimov ordered the second tank, and forming a barrier both tanks straddled the highway.

The tank gunners simultaneously understood what had to be done. While the tanks were turning left the turrets were turned 90 degrees to the right and the guns trained on the motorised column. No orders were needed to open running artillery fire against the fascists, who were scared out of their wits.

"It was a real surprise box for them," Major Maximov related later. "When the forward lorries carrying their infantry blew up from our first salvos, the astounded Germans in the remaining lorries stayed stock-still, like statues, not knowing what the devil to do next. That was all we required to finish the job."

A few lorries, which somehow or other had managed to turn, fled back. Nine smashed lorries with dead and wounded fascists were left on the spot.

In the meantime Astakhov and his machines, having completely blocked the enemy's advance, fought on the railway and highway for five hours without a break; not a single train or a single lorry got through.

Gomozov's tank, for example, straddled the railway track, and fired at both ends of the railway. The engagement was obviously successful, but even so, for some reason Gomozov was dissatisfied.

"What's worrying you?" I asked him later that evening.

"It was a lousy fight."

"What was wrong with it?"

"The whole beauty of it was spoiled. There was this cursed fascist armoured train rushing at me, and there was I, stuck fast like a fool on the track, couldn't budge. I fired five more shots at the devil and back he went. Whether he was afraid of smashing his wheels against my tank, or whether the shots made him think twice, I don't know, anyway that was the last I saw of him. It was damn bad luck. I thought I was in for a glorious scrap. Just imagine what sport—a tank against a whopping great armoured train! I bet I'll never get another chance like that again," complained Gomozov despondently.

Chilikin's tank, which had fought so gallantly on the road with the major, returned from battle.

I rushed up to the smoke-grimed hatches, scorched with the explosions of shells. In the dark belly of the machine squares of bandage flashed white as snow.

"Some of you are wounded?"

The men started to lift the tank commander, Lt. Chilikin, out of the turret, his head bound in a blood-stained bandage. But our Chilikin is a very tough tankman. As soon as they got him into the open he took a deep breath of fresh air and seemed to recover.

"I'll walk," he whispered and, leaning on the shoulders of his comrades, he stood on his own feet.

Gunner Meshchanchikov also received a head wound. Both men had been put out of action by shrapnel from the same shell which had caught them just as they were opening the hatch.

To-day the crew of Kalinichev's tank fought like heroes by the side of Company Commander Astakhov's tank. As a vital link in the chain of armoured land cruisers Kalinichev stood up to the assault of both the fascist artillery and the anti-tank extermination squads. During the day Kalinichev attacked the fascist infantry eighteen times, but still he held the captured road against the Germans. Dormidontov, his skilful driver, made so many giddy twists and turns on the field that the fascist gun-layers could seldom get their sights properly trained on him.

Towards the end of the fighting day Kalinichev's crew surprised everyone by pulling yet another trick out of the box. As was to be expected, the culprit was the incorrigible inventor Dormidontov.

After one attack the machine turned up at the appointed meeting place with a strange load: two men were tied tightly to the sides of the tank. A wounded Red Armyman in socks and no boots was tied to one side, while a fascist, also wounded, but in big Russian valenki (felt boots), was bound to the other.

"What the devil does this mean?" came the query from all sides from both men and commanders.

Dormidontov, as always, had a ready answer.

"I've brought them in for a change of shoes. They'd no time to do it on the spot."

Then he told us the whole story. In a field where an engagement

had been recently fought out and where it was comparatively quiet, Dormidontov suddenly caught sight of a wounded Red Armyman crawling along painfully in the snow. While he was wondering how best to help the man a lanky German ran out from behind some bushes towards the wounded man. Quick as lightning Dormidontov shouted to radio-operator Shishov: "Shoot the swine."

But the swine had already flung himself on the wounded Red Armyman and it was impossible to shoot for fear of killing his comrade. Beside himself with rage, Dormidontov drove full speed ahead to the scene of the sighting.

Meanwhile the fascist had managed to drag the big grey felt boots off the Red Armyman and was hurriedly pulling them on in place of his own discarded ragged footwear.

"Kolya, good old Kolya! Don't let me down! Don't miss the devil!" shouted Dormidontov to Shishov.

Shishov could see clearly that the Red Armyman was still alive, but he had to force himself to wait till the fascist left him. After putting on the stolen valenki the bandit got up and had already taken a couple of hasty strides towards the bushes. But at that moment the long resounding trill of Shishov's machine-gun expressed the one burning desire which possessed the entire tank crew. The fascist thief fell flat on his face in a snowdrift as if mown down by a scythe.

"Lift the wounded soldier onto the machine!" ordered the tank commander to junior driver-mechanic Solovyov.

Suddenly from below Dormidontov begged for the German to be taken along too.

"Whatever for?"

"He's wearing our valenki, isn't he?"

"Very well, take him."

Dormidontov started up the engine while Solovyov and Shishov jumped out of the hatches and hastily picked up the wounded Red Armyman, and the German, who also turned out to be wounded. Pisarev lashed both to separate fittings on the outside of the tank, and rushed them up here, to a safe spot.

Straight away the felt boots were returned to their rightful owner, Red Armyman Nesterenko. The fascist bandit was given a serious warning, never in his life to do such things again.

The tankmen had successfully carried out their main fighting task, the capture of the German highway and mainline railway. In the meantime, units of our infantry had come up to replace them at this important point.

What laughter and jokes, what endless discussions usually take place among the tankmen after the day's successes. But to-day they were not in the mood for celebrations—Lt. Astakhov, the company commander himself, had not returned from the battle.

"Surely he's not killed?" was the first question.

How vividly I could see his long, narrow, handsome face, with the stubborn brow and clear grey eyes. I found myself recalling the whole of our friendship—from our first meeting at the factory workshop

where he assembled his tank to to-day's starting position for the attack. And Lena, his wife—how would she take the terrible news? Already I could see the bitter tears of sorrow on her dark face.

Still, we knew nothing definite yet. Astakhov wasn't the kind of man to be put out of action easily.

CHAPTER XI

THE DEATH OF COMMISSAR KHARCHENKO

IN to-day's fighting Baitalion Commissar Kharchenko was to take the place of Astakhov, as commander of the heavy tanks. The news spread rapidly among all the crews, who had been quite despondent since the loss of their well-loved commander.

"The commissar himself is to command us!" the tankmen excitedly told one another.

Their spirits rose immediately, and preparations for the impending encounter went on in a much livelier fashion. Each man realized what it meant to be commanded by this brave commissar; they all knew his fighting reputation by heart and talked about it with bated breath.

"He can take the place of any member of a tank crew; he can drive, or he can fire the guns, whichever you like."

"He commanded a tank company in Finland."

"That's where he got his Order of the Red Star."

"He got nine pieces of shrapnel in his head. They say that three bits haven't been extracted yet."

Commissar Kharchenko, a fitter from Konstantinovka in the Donets Basin, was only 35 years of age, but his hair was quite grey, and his face deeply lined. The severe wound he sustained in Finland had left its traces. But his twinkling blue eyes and cheeks reddened by keen winds and frosts gave him a boyish appearance. He loved his work as a fitter, he loved his lathe, engines and fighting machines.

Before the beginning of the fighting a few days ago, he and Bushkov, the equipment assistant, went over everything, and Kharchenko personally checked up on every single machine. In addition to this he even found time to mend the portable gramophone for Nastya, the daughter of the woman with whom he was billeted in the village where we halted.

And now, once again, he stood by the tanks with which he was to go into battle. He had completed their inspection.

Thirty minutes to go before they set out for the starting position for their attack. Kharchenko summoned all the crews to his machine.

"You all know that I'm in command of your company?" he asked in a hoarse voice.

"We know all right, Comrade Commissar," came the tankmen's hearty response.

"Do you remember the remarks I made about testing?"

"We remember them."

"Everything checked?"

"Everything O.K."

Then the commissar went on to explain the fighting task, concluding on a slightly raised note:

"To-day we must fight three times, four times, no, ten times as bitterly as yesterday! In the first place, we've got a little account to settle for commander Astakhov and his gallant crew. Secondly, we've got to bag at least a hundred Fritzes for our two wounded men, Chilikin and Meshchanchikov; thirdly, comrades—we haven't come here just to play around, but to wipe out every fascist rat who refuses to surrender."

"You and your tanks, comrades," went on the commissar, "have already done a pretty good job. Now, for the sake of the gallant workers who gave us these splendid machines, for the sake of all the workers and collective farmers who sent us presents, for the sake of Stalin—let's do an even better one.

"To your machines, march!" Kharchenko gave the last order in a dry and abrupt tone, and himself got into Efimov's machine.

When the commissar called on the tankmen for courage and heroism in the name of the workers and collective farmers, and spoke of the presents that had been received, each tankman thought with emotion of the day when they were distributed, and he felt especially deeply the close ties which connected him with those in the rear who were thinking with so much love and solicitude of their heroic defenders at the front. What tenderness and devotion were expressed in the letters enclosed in the parcels!

"Strike the fascists relentlessly, fight courageously. We'll soon be coming to help you"—so wrote two boys from a secondary school somewhere in the Urals.

"All our hopes are with you, all our love and admiration for you," was written in a childish hand, a message dictated by an illiterate aged collective farmer of the Chelyabinsk Region. The old man expressed his admiration by sending a most original present which happened to fall into the hands of Commissar Kharchenko. This was a lump of frozen dough! Comrade Popov, the foreman of a department in the Chelyabinsk Plant, who had brought the presents, told us how at first at the collection post they refused to accept this present from the old man. He had to open his present and show them what it contained. At the front, on New Year's Eve the old man's present was opened once again, this time by the commissar in the presence of the tankmen. Inside the dough he found a chilled roast goose, and inside the goose a pint bottle of vodka!

The joke was enjoyed not only by our battalion, but by all the neighbouring units.

Displaying the goose at the time, Commissar Kharchenko told all the tankmen:

"Do you realize what this means? It's real love, it's the kind of loyalty which mere words can never express. We must thank the people of the Urals for their presents by giving them presents in return—successful achievements at the front."

And the commissar added cheerfully:

"As for the old chap from the Urals—he can rest easy that we'll see to it he has a hundred frozen Fritzes for his one frozen goose!"

The 'K.V.s' went off to battle. All day they fought at the approaches to a big populated place, exterminating the man-power of the enemy who made several unsuccessful attempts to counter-attack. With particular skill the tankmen engaged in ironing out the German infantry who had flung themselves into the snow. The fascist riflemen and machine-gunners never managed to escape from the tanks which rushed on them. They sank into the crunchy snow as in a deep bog—no sooner did they pull one leg out than the other got stuck. And then the avenging steel mammoths were on top of them.

The commissar's machine set an example to the whole battalion, the ace driver, Konstantinov, was at the wheel.

During the engagement a heavy German shell hit the left turret. It deafened and even concussed gun-commander Kustov and radio-operator Vedishchev. In order to maintain uninterrupted gunfire against the target, the commissar himself manned the gun and fired about a dozen shots, until the impeding firing point had been completely blotted out.

At one place the tanks attacked side by side with the infantry, storming a strongly fortified German position. The tankmen sent a brief message to the infantry, calling on them to keep up, and by a joint blow at all costs to capture the German fortifications.

Commissar Kharchenko flung back the lid of the hatch and addressing the men, shouted the inspiring words which rang out over the whole field:

"Forward! Follow us, gallant infantrymen! Death to the fascist reptiles!"

Enemy shells whistled all round us, and one of them exploded with a clang against the side of the commander's machine. The hatch lid immediately slammed down and the commissar became silent. At that same instant the machine rushed forward to the attack, closely followed by the infantry, who seeing that the commissar was already leading them in the decisive assault, raced along, with shouts of "Hurrah!" behind the four heavy tanks.

The outcome of the battle was decided in a twenty-minute skirmish. The tanks freely defiled along the German blindages and trenches, and the infantrymen bayoneted the remnants of the resisting fascists.

"Some tankmen!" exclaimed the infantrymen, during a lull in the battle, admiring the courage of their comrades.

"Some infantry!" exclaimed the tankmen in admiration.

"And some commissar—Phew! what a fighter! A real hero."

Each group admired the other, infantry and tankmen, comrades in arms on the battlefield who had given one another such magnificent support in the recent attack.

The tanks left the scene of the fighting and returned to the assembly point for refuelling and taking in more ammunition.

It seemed to me that the forward machine was lumbering along very sluggishly; and the commissar's cheerful face did not appear in the open hatch. We were rather uneasy over the slow dragging movement of the tanks, swaying from side to side as if they had been badly knocked about.

"What's happened," we shouted at last, unable to contain ourselves any longer and running out to meet them.

But our questions were drowned in the roar of the engines as the twitter of birds is drowned in a thunder-storm. The machines came to a halt and immediately all was silent, as though at the word of command. The tankmen appeared in the hatches simultaneously and with clumsy movements began taking off their leather helmets. In the stillness of dusk the mournful words of one of the commanders reached our ears :

"Comrades! Our commissar is no longer with us."

The heart of each man turned over in his breast, and tears sprang to their eyes. I saw men weep who never feared death.

Commissar Kharchenko had been killed by the shell exploding in the open hatch at the very moment he was calling the infantrymen to keep up with the tanks, to take the German fortifications in a joint decisive assault. His words "Death to the fascist reptiles" which resounded over the whole field were the last he ever spoke.

The commissar was already dead when his tank led the men into the attack. Driver-mechanic Konstantinov carried the commissar's body forward. The men saw the commissar's snow-white tank tear like a whirlwind into the depths of the German defences, crushing everything in its path. The tank bore the lifeless body of Kharchenko; but Kharchenko lived again—in the fighting enthusiasm which gripped the men. At the time, Konstantinov realized that no one knew of the commissar's death, they all thought he was alive and setting them an example of how to fight. Gritting his teeth the driver-mechanic hurled the tank carrying the body of the dead commissar into the most dangerous spots. The commissar's tank was followed closely by the others, and their thrust was so powerful that in a little over an hour nothing but wreckage remained of the German fortified belt.

The funeral of Commissar Kharchenko, who had died like a hero, took place in the evening. Over the grave, battalion commander Maximov called on the men to avenge relentlessly the death of their beloved commi ^r

"I have lost the commissar, my best helper. But I am confident that he has succeeded in implanting in each one of you the seed of his own excellent qualities, qualities which you too will display in the impending battles!"

Driver Konstantinov stepped forward and grimly and solemnly pronounced:

"I vow to be like our commissar!" That was all he said.

The guns were fired three times as a salute to Kharchenko when they laid him in his grave.

CHAPTER XII

FORTY-EIGHT HOURS IN A BESIEGED TANK

THE battalion command had taken every possible step to find Commander Astakhov's tank. Two days had now passed, and nothing had been heard of it; nor was any trace of it to be found on the battlefield where it was last seen.

"Perhaps it's been disabled, and the Germans have taken it to their lines?" The alarming and disagreeable thought came into our minds. Reconnaissance of the German defence lines was organized repeatedly, but without results.

The tanks went into action again, and returned from battle, and each time the first question the returning crews asked was: "Any news of the commander?" And again the reply would be in the negative, and once again the tankmen would refuse to reconcile themselves to the misfortune that had befallen them.

Junior Driver-Mechanic Knutov took the loss especially hard. He made no attempt to conceal his deep feelings. On receiving the negative answer Knutov would return to his machine without a word, and leaning on the track would weep silently. In Astakhov's machine was Leonid Kireyev, Knutov's best friend, with whom he had fought in the same unit the whole time. They were passionately devoted to one another, even sitting down to write their letters home together. On the long journey from the factory to the front they lay side by side in the bunks and carried on long and earnest conversations.

Knutov, once more back from battle, stood as usual grieving by his tank. His comrades called him for dinner—some tasty tinned food, warmed up, but he obstinately refused everything.

Suddenly and quite unexpectedly, like a bolt from the blue—the joyful tidings flew light-winged as a bird, and as deafening as the explosion of a shell:

"Astakhov and his men are alive!"

Who had said it, and where it came from, we still did not know. Knutov ran like mad to the H.Q. post. A crowd of men had already

gathered at the post. There they sat on a stretched-out tarpaulin, Pridannikov, wounded in the arm, and Astakhov's driver Tenditny, all grimy, hollow-eyed, lean; they were before the commander and were surrounded by the tankmen.

This is what they had to say:

"In the fighting two days ago the machine raced far ahead, into the flank of the German defence line, and conducted successful flank fire along the whole of the forward lines. But a heavy artillery shell smashed the driving wheel. The machine just twisted and turned on one spot. As soon as the Germans saw this they directed the fire of all their batteries against the tank. For a whole hour all we could hear inside the machine was the ceaseless thunder of the shells exploding against the armour. The engine had already conked out and the gun was stuck. We were hidden from our own troops by a thicket, and could give no signal. At last the Germans stopped their artillery fire and practically a whole battalion of them with grenades and explosives rushed against our tank."

What fortitude and self-discipline they must have had, not to open premature machine-gun fire!

"Several times Astakhov warned us—'Fire only at a range of a hundred yards!'

"Our three machine-guns, trained on the Germans, remained silent. The lads waited yard after yard, second after second, so as to make sure of the biggest number.

"The first hand-grenades fell near the tank, and as though by arrangement we sent a concerted salvo against the fascists from the three barrels of the machine-guns. The Germans immediately wavered, flung themselves on the ground, but continued to advance crawling along on their bellies.

"We shot at them singly. We spent several hours in this way, trying not to use up too many bullets. We realized that each one of these bullets meant our life.

"Towards evening the Germans retired about 200 yards to one side. Astakhov immediately ordered Kireyev:

"Leave the tank, creep up to our lines and get help."

"Senior Sergeant Kireyev seized five hand-grenades, and cautiously opening the hatch, looked out. Everything was quiet all round. He slipped off into the snow, rounded the machine and disappeared silently into the darkness of the night.

"During the night small groups of Germans crept up to the tank, but would not come close. We were very surprised," continued the tankmen, "at their super-caution. The darkness was all in their favour—why didn't they try to set fire to the tank or blow it up?

"We concluded that they intended to take the tank over to their own lines.

"The night passed, and dawn broke, but there was no sign either of Kireyev or any help. Astakhov gave another order:

"Pridannikov and Tenditny. Prepare to rejoin the rest. Instructions the same as those for Kireyev."

Full Speed Through the Snow.



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Soviet Troops Recapturing a Village on the N.W. Front



Facing page 65

"'Comrade Commander. Allow us to stay with you to the end, and if necessary to die with you,' we begged Astakhov. But you know the sort of chap he is . . .

"Sorry, that's just what I don't want of you—to die. We two are enough—Makhalev and myself. Off you go!"

"Armed with hand-grenades we left the machine stealthily. We crawled on our bellies about two hundred yards, to the forest. As soon as we got into the woods we followed our compasses, and raced towards our own lines. And here we are."

However great the battalion's joy at the discovery of the tank's whereabouts, Knutov, of course, wasn't able to share it fully. The fate of his friend Leonid Kiteyev was still unknown.

A small expedition of three men, including Tendlitny, was equipped and sent off to the damaged tank. The expedition was to select an approach for the tanks which were to tow Astakhov's machine to safety. In addition, the expedition was instructed to deliver a sack of food for Astakhov and Makhalev in the damaged tank.

Major Maximov, the battalion commander, wrote a note to Astakhov: 'Comrade Astakhov, we are proud of your conduct. We're coming to help you. Evacuating you to-night or to-morrow. Hold out. Best wishes. Maximov.'

Senior Sergeant Knutov asked Political Instructor Shcherbak for permission to join the expedition. The commissar gave Knutov permission to fit himself out and go in search of the tank.

The expedition set off towards the German lines, but was not fated to bring any help to the crew. Each time the Germans observed a movement on the horizon they opened indiscriminate fire. All night long they kept the approaches to the tank covered with machine-gun cross-fire, and sometimes by firing with mortars. The tankmen also observed that all this time the Germans were carrying out some unusual engineering work around the damaged tank.

"What can it mean?" the men asked each other.

But when morning broke there wasn't a single German in sight.

The battalion commander decided, despite everything, to attempt the evacuation of the tank. Exactly forty-eight hours had passed since the tank was encircled by the enemy. And just as the towing tanks were ready to rush out from the thicket in which they were concealed, to help Astakhov, Astakhov himself appeared as though by magic.

"Comrade commander, where do you come from?"

"From the tank."

"We're just making for it."

"You mustn't!"

"Why not?"

"You mustn't, now, you'll be killed. The tank is mined."

And this is what Astakhov told us: All through the night the Germans had been working around his machine, laying cases of explosives some distance away from it, not under it. Astakhov had

guessed their dirty plans—the Germans intended to blow up not the disabled machine, but the undamaged ones which would unfailingly come to take Astakhov's in tow.

"I'll have to warn them," Astakhov decided, and for this purpose despatched Makhalev, the last member of his crew.

Left alone, Astakhov saw that the towing machines were getting ready to leave the thicket and go to fetch him. In the meantime the Germans deliberately took cover, so as not to hinder the tanks from approaching the scene of their own destruction.

Then Astakhov made one more decision, to leave the tank. It was a difficult decision to take, to abandon his beloved tank. He did not want to do it, but nevertheless in order to save the other tanks and the many lives of his dear comrades he abandoned his machine, first of all putting its armament out of action and taking the last machine-gun with him. He crept up to the towing tanks just in time to warn them of the impending danger.

Shortly after this Makhalev appeared. With the help of a special squad of sappers it was possible a little later safely to evacuate the damaged machine. Thanks to the vigilance and audacity of the tank commander the cunning plan of the fascists turned out a complete failure.

Several hours later, to the great joy of all the 'K.V.' crews, and especially of Knutov, Senior Sergeant Kireyev, the fifth member of the crew of the damaged tank, turned up. Sent off on his commander's instructions, he had lost his way and wandered in the forest for two days and nights, not knowing whether he was on our own territory or in the German rear. Medical orderlies of one of the rifle regiments picked up Kireyev in the forest, with a slight wound in the leg.

During the whole of the forty-eight hours which Astakhov's crew had spent in the enemy's lair they exterminated about a hundred of the fascists who were attacking them. And before the tank was put out of action it crushed two batteries of fascists who were in open positions, and demolished four block-houses with its shells.

How many anxious hours we had spent worrying over the fate of the gallant crew. And now at last here they were altogether once more—sitting in one big hut, on a tarpaulin spread out on the floor, lovingly and carefully cleaning the mechanism of the tanks' armaments—just as I had seen them in the factory workshop when the tanks were assembled. Then they had sat and examined and oiled the machine-guns, and tested the various gadgets in the tanks.

"Well, what do you think, will it work?" the factory director, who had come into the workshop, asked in a friendly voice as he bent over their circle.

"You bet. Seeing where they've come from and into whose hands they've fallen, you can be sure these machines will do a first-class job!"

The Kirov workers and the Urals people ought to know now how well the crew have kept their word, what a first-class job the guns are doing in battle—passed from one reliable pair of hands to another.

CHAPTER XIII

FORWARD WITH THE BANNER OF THE SOVIETS

THE first to meet us in the liberated villages and hamlets were the guerillas.

The Germans were not yet driven out of the village. Breaking into it, the tanks and the infantry crushed the last centres of resistance, but the fascists in the garrets and cellars still continued to fire. From all directions, side by side with the tanks and shoulder to shoulder with the infantry, civilians appeared with automatic rifles, grenades and machine-guns in their hands. These were the local guerillas, they helped the troops to comb out and destroy the remnants of the fascist vermin.

They did it all with a thorough knowledge of the job, a familiarity with all the corners, turnings, and cellars in the village, and they crushed the fascists as bugs are crushed between grooves and cracks in boards.

The village had been cleared. One of our lads, Belanchevadze, ran up to the group of guerillas, whose automatic rifles were still hot in their hands.

"Shaterchik!" he shouted to a young man in a black jacket, who was giving orders of some kind.

The man wheeled round, and looked at Belanchevadze with a long and piercing glance. Then, flushing deeply, he strode forward and with childish glee exclaimed in a loud voice:

"Ilyusha! It can't be you?"

The friends embraced. Former students at the Moscow Technological Institute, they had recognized one another. "Shaterchik," the old nickname from institute days, which derived from the word "Shater," had some special significance for them, and was pronounced with great affection.

"So you're a guerilla, eh, Shaterchik?" asks Belanchevadze.

"As you see. I'm the commissar of the detachment. Here, you must meet the detachment commander."

"Anatole." The detachment commander introduced himself to Belanchevadze with outstretched hand—a short, round-faced man, with the bearing of a commander, and a German automatic rifle slung on his back.

"Where have you been hiding yourself?" inquired Belanchevadze.

"We've been sticking around," answered the commissar, indicating the entire locality with a sweeping gesture. "Besides, don't you know—we helped your advance."

"Do you mean our tanks?"

"That's just what I do mean. Tonya! Galys! Boris! Mitya!" shouted the commissar, and young keen-eyed boy and girl guerillas came running up.

"Here they are—they crossed the front lines, reconnoitred and indicated the road along which you made your way here."

We flung off our mittens and with a firm handshake thanked our young friends.

Three of them turned out to be 'related' to our tankmen—they were former lorry drivers, tractor drivers. Tonya, formerly a seamstress, was now the best machine-gunner of the detachment.

Jokingly the commissar introduced her as 'an expert at artistic stitching on the Germans.'

The guerillas told us briefly about their heroic deeds in the rear of the Germans. The first commander of their detachment, Thomson, who had been director of a soap factory, was killed. But they made the Germans pay dearly for his death. The detachment had killed hundreds of fascists. Guerilla F. had burned in one hut 24 fascists who refused to surrender.

Collective farmer S., an aged guerilla, when the detachment commander was killed, set himself the task of stealing the defiled body of the commander from the village and giving it decent burial. S made his way into the village, and found the body of the commander which had not yet been removed, lying near the German H.Q. He flung grenades into the windows of the H.Q. and in the ensuing confusion carried away the commander's body on a sledge. The commander, beloved by the whole detachment, was solemnly buried in the forest in the presence of every member of the detachment.

In place of the notches made by the guerillas on the trees to mark the grave in the forest, a memorial is to be erected to the loyal fighter for his motherland.

A meeting of collective farmers was held jointly with the tankmen in the village of Podborovye, which we had liberated. Deputies to the Rural Soviet were to be elected.

Our compatriots, citizens of the Soviet Union, who had languished for more than three months under the yoke of the fascist vandals, came streaming into one of the cottages which had escaped demolition at the hands of the German pillagers. They were mostly women. There was a fair sprinkling of old men and children. The menfolk were at war, striking the fascists either at the fronts or with the guerilla detachments from the rear.

As in former days, the platform table was covered with red bunting, and on it stood a portrait of Stalin.

The meeting was opened by Political Instructor Shcherbak:

"On the instructions of the Commander-in-Chief," he announced, "we came here to drive out the German invaders, to liberate our native towns and villages from the fascist yoke. Already we can claim to have carried out part of this task."

Before proceeding with the election of deputies to the Rural Soviet

a document was read out enumerating the atrocities committed by the fascists in Podborovye.

In the frosty air the voice of the reader—a local citizen, Chebykin, radio operator in the guerilla detachment—sounded bitter.

“ . . . The Germans during their rule burned down 78 houses; they shot and hanged 42 persons . . . ”

Each fresh name seared into the brain, pierced the very heart. While the terrible list was being read out hatred and the longing for revenge seethed with indomitable force in every breast.

The Red Army men were unable to stand by unmoved. They clenched their fists and ground their teeth, deep exclamations of indignation broke from them. It seemed as though at the very next name read out, without any order or command being given, they would race to the tanks standing close by and rush once more into battle—to shoot, crush, utterly destroy the hated executioners and robbers, in order to avenge the violated honour and lives of the Soviet citizens.

But the fury of the men was suddenly softened by a gentle flow of quiet words. A woman was speaking, the wife of Red Armyman Karkychev. Weeping tears of joy and excitement, she expressed to us, the men of the Red Army, in a voice full of emotion, her heartfelt gratitude for the freedom we had given to her and her fellow-villagers.

“All the time we never gave up hope that we would once again see daylight and you, our beloved ones. We knew that we would be liberated. And here he is—this is he—our liberator!” she exclaimed triumphantly, pointing to the portrait of Stalin.

“Tell us, you have come straight from him to our Podborovye village—it is true, isn’t it?” an old woman asked one of the tankmen nodding in the direction of the portrait.

With a touch of excusable pride the tankman admitted that they really had been sent by Stalin.

The meeting elected as deputies to the Rural Soviet: Karpicheva, who had actively helped the guerillas during the whole period of German occupation; 52 year old Alexeyev, who had been robbed of all he possessed by the Germans; Demicheva, a former member of the management board of the collective farm; and the guerilla radio-operator Chebykin.

A touching letter of thanks, addressed to Stalin, was drawn up and signed by all the collective farmers. The letter ended with these words:

‘May our powerful Red Army thrive and grow stronger, may they strike the enemy relentlessly by day and by night, on land and in the air, on the waters and under the waters!’

The representatives of this powerful Red Army—the gallant tankmen, who had brought liberation to thousands of Soviet people, who had given them the opportunity of restoring their own beloved Soviet power—now stood at this very meeting, proud and happy, their hearts filled with emotion.

This small strip of our native territory, which for over three months had been in the power of the Germans, had been freed at last from the

enemy and the victorious crimson banner of the Soviets once again floated triumphantly in the breeze.

"Long live the Soviet Power!" a voice exclaimed.

"Long live the Great Soviet Union!" responded dozens of voices.

And the three hearty cheers of the tankmen, caught up by the voices of all the collective farmers, rang throughout the district, resounded in the forests and river valleys, reaching out in the direction of the Germans like a terrible warning of their inescapable, imminent and final defeat.

CHAPTER XIV

THE NAME OF A HERO

It was a critical day: at all costs the fate of the enemy strong-point had to be settled. The battle raged with alternating success all day. At last, the final and decisive attack was ordered.

"Now then, tankmen, it's up to you, don't let us down. Thousands of eyes will be looking at you from the land and from the skies!" said Chief of Tank-troops Vershinin encouragingly, addressing the men.

At the very height of the attack, when the forward tanks, loaded with infantry, were already flattening the first line of barbed wire entanglements, a big formation of enemy planes came swooping down on us straight out of the sun. They were fighters and bombers, all carrying a heavy load.

Under the murderous machine-gun fire of the fighter planes and the flying splinters of exploding bombs, the first ranks of our attacking infantry were thinning out, while the infantry landing parties on the tanks became smaller and smaller. A few more runs-in from the fighter planes and our entire attack threatened to collapse.

But just at this precise moment a couple of our own fighters zoomed overhead and tore into the German planes. They were like falcons in the midst of a flock of crows, flinging themselves right and left, causing havoc in the sky.

The air trembled and roared with gunfire and the throb of the engines. The enemy planes had no time now to attend to the land. Each had to look out for his skin in the sky.

Our infantry and tankmen took full advantage of this respite to push home their attack against the enemy with ever-growing fury.

"He's ablaze—he's ablaze!" came a sudden shout from all sides, some crying out in alarm and others with satisfaction.

"He's ablaze . . ." a voice shouted triumphantly, and everyone saw the blazing fascist plane turning over and over in the air, with flashing crosses on its sides and the swastika on the rudder.

The Red Star fighter planes were literally like demons in the sky, making it a veritable hell for the fascists. One after another two more enemy machines wobbled in the sky, keeping their positions with difficulty. Then one of our planes was damaged; it turned and coolly, without losing height, made for our own rear lines. "He's left alone, all by himself, while they, the swine, have got seven!" one of our men exclaimed with consternation.

In the meantime on the land, on the very ridge of the enemy defences, a life and death battle was being fought. Having smashed down the barbed wire entanglements and cleared the way for the infantry, the 'K.V.' tanks were now hard at it, battering the enemy block-houses and anti-tank artillery.

From all sides rang out the triumphant shouts of the Red Army men, who had broken into the strong-point.

Meanwhile a tragic scene was being enacted in the sky: one against seven. The Soviet plane kept them circling around him for a few more minutes. Then to the accompaniment of a roar of cheering from below, he shot down another Messerschmitt.

Suddenly, the shouts of joy broke off: mortally wounded, our plane started spinning down with ever-growing speed. Thousands of eyes stared, thousands of arms were outstretched, as if in a vain attempt to catch the falling machine.

The troops were already in full possession of the so-called 'unapproachable' strong-point. Each man in his heart thanked the pilot who had come to their aid at such an opportune moment, thus saving the whole of the operation, each man thought sorrowfully of the tragic end of the heroic fighter. But no one knew his name.

An hour later we learned his name; the unknown airman who had died like a hero before the eyes of thousands of Soviet warriors was Lt. Timur Mikhailovich Frunze, son of the famous Red Army general.

Tears sprang to the eyes of the tankmen—men just as grim and fearless as Timur had been. We men and commanders of the 'K.V.' tanks had lost not only a hero, but one who was near and dear to us, a staunch friend of our tanks.

"And what about Tanya Frunze, at home there in the factory . . . How must she feel about this," remarked mechanic Knutov with emotion.

"She came to see us off from the factory . . . she saw us off into battle . . .!" said another with strong feeling in his voice.

Astakhov got onto a tree-stump, and silently removed his black leather helmet. All the tankmen rose to their feet and bared their heads.

Astakhov made a vow—to exact relentless vengeance from the fascists for the death of Timur; to fight the enemy as remorselessly as the heroic Timur and his father Mikhail Vassilyevich Frunze fought them.

The men's deep response made the skies ring: "We will!"

The Battalion Commissar suggested that one of the 'K.V.' tanks

should be given the name of Timur Flunze in commemoration of the hero. All the crews shouted out, demanding that their tank should bear his name.

"No. His name will only be conferred on the tank which, following the example of Timur, is bolder than the rest, the tank which most relentlessly pursues and destroys the fascists."

And this started the competition to bear the name of the hero.

CHAPTER XV

STARAYA RUSSA

Two ancient towns, Staraya Russa and Novgorod, stand like twins on either side of blue Lake Ilmen.

White winter fields and snow-covered hills; this land has seen much in its centuries-old history. This is where the Novgorod merchant-volunteers gathered, where the banners fluttered in the bloody battles against the foreign invader.

The thunder of historic battles still seems to re-echo over these fields of ancient Russia, great, indomitable, eternally young.

The town of Russa is in German hands. It is clearly visible from our positions: only a short while ago in a 50 kilometre thrust over frozen Lake Ilmen and its tributaries—a veritable warrior's march over ice, through blinding snowstorms, deep drifts and biting winds—we came within a stone's throw of the town and found ourselves under its very walls. Now our troops are engaged in a systematic, daily, tireless 'cleaning out' of the fascists from the surrounding villages.

Quite a number of officers and men of the 90th and 30th German divisions have been 'cleaned out' of the Soviet villages, 'cleaned out' in such a manner that they'll never see daylight again.

There is also a division of S.S. cut-throats here, the 'Death's Head' Division. They fully justify their title—particularly after each encounter with us.

Our troops and the tanks attached to them have already liberated more than half of the three hundred populated places in the Staraya Russa district. The ski detachments jointly with the guerillas have cut many of the feeder railway lines and highways leading to Staraya Russa from the West. One ski detachment broke into a war-prisoners' camp on the outskirts of the town and freed several hundred men. There were both military and civilian prisoners in this camp.

The liberated prisoners brought along a German camp guard with them. He stood before us, lanky, unshaven, caked from head to foot in some kind of rusty-red ice.

"What's the crust on him?"

"That's pickled gherkin brine," answered one of the released men loquaciously. "He hid from us in a brine barrel . . . We dragged him out; on the way here he froze over."

It appeared that the prisoners, hearing the tommy-gun fire of the ski battalion, did not wait till they were set free but started fighting on the spot. They smashed the barrack doors and ran out. The guards took to their heels. Close by were the quartermaster's stores, and the guards hid themselves in empty barrels and tubs containing pickled gherkins. The prisoners found them in these tubs and barrels. The terrible months in the prison camp, the beatings, tortures and humiliations had had their effect, and as soon as the men discovered their torturers they quickly made an end of them. Only one guard survived. He was dragged out of the brine barrel and brought to us. Now he cringed in the corner, looking fawningly and with fear at the men around him.

"He should be thankful we didn't pickle him properly," ended the narrator to the accompaniment of the laughter of his listeners.

Story followed story, each man wishing to tell us of the tortures he has suffered. Take Nikita Voitov, a lean chap with a hoarse voice and long beard and whiskers. To look at, one would think him at least forty. But Voitov is a lad of twenty. Each month spent in a German prison-camp puts five years onto one's age. Indeed, one is lucky to become aged, men die by the hundred. From starvation, unheated huts, brutal treatment . . .

"In December," said Voitov, "several hundred of us were taken to work in Dno. It was bitterly cold. We were bundled half-naked into uncovered open trucks. We told the interpreter—'We'll freeze, we've no clothing.' The filthy parasite only laughed. 'You won't die, it's easier to work naked, and even if you do peg out, it won't be such a dreadful calamity.'

"We got going. Naturally, we began to go numb and blue with the cold and the freezing winds. Our legs gave way beneath us, and some fell to the floors of the cars, others under the cars. Those that fell out the guards shot."

We had cut the supply lines for the German garrison in Staraya Russa from many directions. Things get worse and worse for the Hitlerites every day, both physically and morally.

The guerillas helped us enormously in this respect. Out of one small group—the party nucleus in the district—which had been operating in the Staraya Russa district from the very first day of the German invasion, there had grown big detachments, including the famous 'Ivan the Terrible' detachment. When the Germans come up against these detachments they experience a terror bordering on the mystic. During the past month alone, in the towns and suburbs the guerillas have killed 196 fascists, destroyed 23 lorries carrying shells, and one staff bus, shot down one bomber, and blown up three railway bridges and two warehouses. Also the guerillas and the Red Army are helped in every way possible by the inhabitants of Russa itself and of the whole district.

The town-dwellers and the collective farmers refused to submit to the rule of the German invaders. When the fascists announced the recruitment of volunteers to go to work in Germany 'for six months,' not a single person responded. The advocates of the 'voluntary system' then took to the knout. By force they drove the people out of their homes, under guards. Then the flight started: the 'volunteers' fled wherever they could. This 'recruitment' supplied quite a number of new members to the guerilla detachments.

In the town, the invaders had fixed up a sort of civil administration, headed by the Whiteguard Bykov, next door to the military commandant's office.

"He's a lanky, ginger-haired chap, splutters, and wears a spanking new suit." Such was the description of the town's head given by inhabitants who had fled from the Germans.

"On one occasion I went to see him," citizen Philippov told us, "and asked him for medical aid, as I was suffering from the effects of an explosion."

"What explosion, and where?" he asked me.

"Well," I answered, "Their Highnesses the German gentlemen were enjoying themselves, having a bit of a lark; they thought they'd have a joke, so they tossed a grenade out of the window at the passers-by. A splinter got me."

"What," he shouted. "You condemn the behaviour of the officer-gentlemen? You dare to criticise? Get out of here."

"And so I went off and licked my wounds, like a dog. Throughout the whole of the town only one clinic was opened by the Germans, and even there you had to pay—ten marks for each visit; and the highest wage in the town is 30 marks a month. . . ."

There isn't a single school functioning in the town or in the district. Under threat of shooting, the teachers were ordered to burn every single Russian classic. Then the Nazis added the classics of every other language, even the German—the whole lot were burnt to ashes.

The Germans put up special posters announcing that Staraya Russa was an ancient German city.

Evidently with the object of imparting a 'German appearance' to the town, the Hitlerites drove the cattle into the beautiful old cathedral, hanged the bodies of their tortured victims at the crossings of the main thoroughfares, and opened brothels into which they dragged women and young girls by force. After all this, the appearance of the town was really and truly German.

But even the Hitlerite rulers found themselves in a dilemma as the result of such thorough 'Germanization,' for it so happened that during their occupation of the town twenty per cent of all the women, driven into the brothels by the Germans under threat of shooting, became infected with venereal disease. The order announcing this fact did not deny that the German officers and men brought the disease. The order gave the soldiers who suffered from the disease the urgent advice not to rape women. Were they concerned about the population? Not they! They were thinking about themselves. "One

infected soldier may infect dozens of others. . . ." What about the unfortunate women? Who cares about them! The Germans don't indulge in such tenderness.

One poster read: 'At the birth of a ninth living child or seventh son, the parents have the right to choose for the christening the names of Adolf Hitler or Reichs-marshall Herman Goering.'

Close by, in the street swing the bodies of two pregnant women—Nilova and Boitsova. Here too swings the body of a third woman—Prokofieva—who has left four small children. What were these women hanged for? Simply as a warning.

As 'a warning' they shot citizen Smelov, and left his two-year-old son out in the frost to die. The boy was picked up by the guerillas, who rubbed his hands and feet with snow and adopted him.

There is no end to the executions and humiliations. In the streets and squares the bodies of hanged people swing in the wind. Who were these unfortunates? What were the crimes they committed? One man defended his wife from a German officer. To the gallows with him! They called another a guerilla, because he happened to be nearby when the guerillas fired at a German patrol. To the gallows with him!

Such is the life of the population of Russia. They hate the invaders with the whole of their being. They passionately await the hour when the Red Banner is once again triumphantly hoisted over the town, when the traitors, torturers, executioners get their deserts and the account is rendered for every tear shed, for every drop of innocent blood spilt.

Under the heel of the German plunderers the town has become completely impoverished and its inhabitants are starving. There are no shops, and all semblance of a market has disappeared. The bread ration is 200 grammes every few days. Disease and illness among the population has increased. Typhus cases are shot outright by the Germans, or else compelled to cross the front lines on foot—with the object of spreading the disease among the Soviet troops.

Wrecking and acts of sabotage disrupt the German rear. As the result of sabotage by the workers on the railways and in the stations, not a day passes without some accident or breakdown. Suddenly German barracks go up in flames. Only a short time ago a four-storey building taken over by the Field Security Secret Police was set alight simultaneously in four places. All the documents were burned and forty callous fascists roasted.

Three times the Germans changed their aerodrome in Staraya Russia, and each time it was destroyed by our aircraft; friends from below indicated the target. In a similar manner three warehouses containing fuel and one ammunition dump were destroyed.

' Sometimes on their way through the streets people would see a crowd gathered round a German notice. Getting closer, they would see, pasted next to the German notice, *The Tribune*, the underground paper published by the Staraya Russia District Committee of the Party;

that is what the townsfolk are looking at. If they are challenged for reading forbidden literature they coolly answer: "We're reading the German order . . ."

The Germans find life in Russia more and more difficult from day to day. The earth burns under their feet, death rains from the air, bursts from the ground, from the front and from the rear. Under the steady hammering of our shells they gradually began falling back westwards nearer to Lake Chudskoye.

The fascists have taken some pretty heavy knocks on the Ilmen and around Ilmen. Well, so what? History frequently repeats itself. They caught it on the Ilmen, they'll also catch it on Lake Chudskoye, just as their forefathers, the Teutonic knights, got a licking from the Russian general, Alexander Nevsky.

CHAPTER XVI

A HEART-TO-HEART TALK

IN talking to the enemy we invariably employ the persuasive language of artillery, machine-guns, mortars and bombs. Each day we convince the Hitlerite swaggerers, deceived by their initial successes, that unless they abandon their idea of subduing the Soviet Union our troops will exterminate them to the last man.

Each of our attacks begins with an artillery overture. Listening to this terrible music, grimly observing the innumerable, countless bodies and graves of their comrades, the German soldiers begin to give thought to their own fate. They become more susceptible not only to the explosions of the shells, but to every living human word which they manage to catch from our lines.

They eagerly pick up our propaganda leaflets, and listen attentively to the transmissions from our trench loudspeaker installation. By means of this installation the 7th Guards Division speaks daily to the soldiers of the encircled 16th German Army. We bring war-prisoners to the microphone: Corporal Paul Hirmann, Privates Herman Duhr and Fritz Blohm. Only 200 yards separate us from the German dug-outs. The German prisoners call on all their friends by their nicknames. Their voices through the loudspeakers carry a distance of several kilometres.

"Achtung! Achtung!—Attention! Attention! Chaps! Don't believe all the promises of the officers that you'll soon be rescued. We saw what this 'rescuing' amounted to yesterday. When things got too hot for our garrison Captain Majardress pretended to be wounded in his left arm and made a nice safe get-away by plane! And he a Chevalier of the Knights' Cross! As you know, our garrison was captured by the Soviet troops. All those who refused to surrender

were killed. We surrendered and now we're the happiest chaps on earth . . ."

Frequently the infuriated officers order their men to open hurricane mortar fire against the loudspeaker installation. The broadcast has to be broken off for a time, to give the guns a turn . . . Then the untiring and fearless organizers of the broadcasts—announcer Boidin, engineers Tupitsin and Stepanov—rapidly change the 'firing position' of the loudspeaker, and once more set to work on their favourite job, which is not without danger.

One night, after touring the surrounded 16th Army from practically all sixteen directions (as the Russians say), I started a conversation with the Germans through the trench loudspeaker installation.

Well, there was nothing more natural than that I should talk to these trapped Hitlerites about another encirclement, one in which I found myself, with Major-General Galitsky's troops, for a whole month. The positions are now reversed: we had safely broken out and now it was the Germans who were encircled, and their situation appeared to be that of miserable, but stubborn, garrisons of men sentenced to death.

We are thriving, and successfully striking blow after blow at the Fritzes, who day by day die in their hundreds and thousands from hunger and our ceaseless strafing.

"We're trapped in a pan with the lid tight closed," was the description of the position given in a letter home by one of the soldiers of the 16th Army.

Well, here is how my conversation was conducted with these inhabitants of the 'closed pan.'

We were in a comfortable dug-out in the firing line. Intermittent rifle and mortar fire could be heard. Boidin advised me to employ the services of Lili Marlen, a German singer, and a favourite of the Germans, so as to attract their attention to my talk.

Suddenly, above the gruff barking of the mortars, one of Lili Marlen's love songs, broadcast from a gramophone record, breaks through in a high-pitched trill. As though at the word of command, the German fire immediately broke off. A lull had set in and all that was to be heard was the voice of the singer, clear and loud. Then came the call in a good German accent:

"Attention! Attention!"

Boidin tells the Germans that they are to be addressed by an officer who has just arrived in the Staraya Russa district from the Urals with the most powerful Soviet tanks.

The silence is not interrupted. That's the main thing. I have in front of me the German text which I had previously drawn up.

"Men and officers of the encircled German Army. You know far better than I what your situation is like; we won't talk of it, it's very distressing. We'll talk about something more interesting.

"I arrived here with the powerful Soviet tanks which we are turning

out in the Urals and which you have dubbed 'Soviet mammoths.' Our echelon raced from the Urals to Staraya Russa—some two thousand odd kilometres—in two days. Not at all bad?

"The mammoths went into action against your troops. Thousands of shells were hurled against us. It was real hell, and the thought occurred to us—surely we did not travel so fast in order to meet death so quickly? Your artillery continued its shelling.

"Each of the tanks with which I arrived got several dents in their armour, from the impact of your shells. But the armour is so strong that not a single tank was put out of action, they all continued to fight.

"Our tank group commander, Lt. Astakhov, was caught by you—you disabled his driving wheel. For two days he was under fire from all directions; he answered the fire, but still it seemed that his doom was inevitable. But you yourselves know the final outcome of that engagement—we took our tank back, saved the crew, and where it had stood you picked up the bodies of seventy of your comrades who had been killed. Five members of a tank crew killed seventy Germans—not a bad record?"

My talk was suddenly interrupted by a short burst of machine-gun fire. I was afraid I might not be able to finish my speech.

"Achtung! Achtung!" immediately called our announcer Boidin. "The officer has not yet ended. An hour ago he was a guest in the H.Q. of Major-General von Lipp, commander of the 290th German division of your army . . . Achtung! Achtung!"

Quiet once again.

"Soldiers and officers!" I went on. "I have visited the H.Q. of Major-General Lipp, commander of the 290th German Division. These H.Q. are in the forest, underground, but they cannot compare with the underground quarters in which you sit rotting!

"The general has six large rooms with parquet floors. I went in, and slipped on the floor which had been waxed till it gleamed. In another moment I would have been stretched out on the parquet. You smile and think to yourselves: 'What would have happened to him if he'd visited our trenches, where you have to slide in mud and fall into deep stinking puddles every minute?' . . . Yes, I agree with you, your trenches are not so pleasant a place to invite guests to, or even for the hosts themselves, as the general's headquarters.

"In the general's dug-out there's a piano; he enjoys music. In this respect you've no need to envy the general: as you know, we entertain you daily with the sound of our artillery music . . .

"There is a brilliantly enamelled white bath in one of the general's rooms. I would have liked to undress on the spot and sink into the crystal-clear water, although I'd had a bath only the day before and didn't need another. But I thought of you . . . How long is it since you last had such a bath? And the underclothes! Fragrant, smooth-ironed, with initials! Where are they?

"According to your quartermaster's order that we have captured, the last time you had a change of clothing was two months and six

days ago. This is outrageous! How it must stink and what a colour it must be!

"In the general's quarters we discovered a private cellar of hundreds of bottles of Burgundy, champagne, cognac, vodka. What do you get to drink with your dinner? The general evidently considers that wine would be quite out of place with your dinner, which consists of nothing but stale horseflesh.

"I saw all this with my own eyes in the general's H.Q. which was recently captured in the fighting by our troops. These troops included the tanks which have arrived from the Urals. There are more and more of our troops and our tanks, and the circle of fire is drawing ever closer and closer around you.

"What is your way out?

"This is the same question which you Germans, at the beginning of the war, put to General Galitsky, whom you had encircled. I was there with his troops. I saw how Galitsky saved the division. He and his staff did not jump into a plane and flee from encirclement as did some of your generals. Our general continued to fight on stubbornly and led three-fourths of the division out of the trap.

"But you won't escape from the encirclement. In the first place you are pressed too close by a solid wall of Soviet troops; secondly your encirclement and annihilation is directed by talented commanders, including your old acquaintance, General Galitsky. Don't kid yourselves he'll let you go, now that he has learned so well what encirclement means and knows where to search for the weak links, the gaps and cracks which have to be closed in time in order to prevent the escape of the enemy! No! You won't be able to squeeze even one man out of our encirclement! Don't waste your lives for nothing, give yourselves up. Think of your wives and children, your relatives and friends, anxiously awaiting you at home. We'll send you back to them after the war . .

"Goebbels tried to console you a little while ago with the information that it was not you who were encircled, but you who had encircled and destroyed our 7th Guards Division, and that Colonel Bedin, the commander of the division, had been killed, and buried in the ground. Even you, as well as we, had to laugh at this. You laughed because you know better than Goebbels what your real position is, and who has been encircled. We laughed because the division has never been destroyed by anyone; it continues successfully to fight you.

"A few hours ago I spoke to Colonel Bedin, the commander of this division—a cheerful, lively man. This man had been 'killed' by Goebbels.

"The colonel asked me to tell you that though you may have buried him over the air, unless you give yourselves up he'll bury you all in the ground.

"Think this over, think it over well! Follow the example of thousands of your comrades and give yourselves up! Give yourselves up!"

"This is the end of the transmission, the end of our transmission!" stated the announcer, and we hastened from our dug-out to another shelter.

After an hour's lull the battle flared up once more.

CHAPTER XVII

TANKS AGAINST TANKS

COLONEL KATENIN arrived in the battalion. A stocky, good-natured, determined man, wearing a leather overcoat.

Everyone knew the colonel; the commanders knew him from previous joint service with the tank troops; the men knew him from his keen participation with us in all the recent most complicated operations.

"The colonel's arrived," the news went round the crews in a flash, "and what's the betting he's brought us a thorough good job to do."

Gathering the commanding personnel together in a nearby thicket, Katenin announced: "The enemy has brought up tank units on our sector of the front. He intends to make a break-through to link up with his 16th Army. Our job is to prevent the break-through, to fight like the devil and bar the road against the German tanks."

The tankmen's faces glowed with excitement. Their eyes sparkled with daring and stormy impatience. How could it be otherwise? A battle against tanks was what they had been looking forward to.

Although the battalion had been in constant action against enemy infantry, artillery, and even paratroops, this would be their first encounter with tanks, the much-vaunted German tanks.

"Ha! This is where we get the chance to measure our strength . . ."

The crews made their preparations for the forthcoming tank battle as though for the greatest jubilee celebrations, but Lieutenant Astakhov was disappointed—two out of his five tanks were undergoing field repairs. Astakhov's own machine was being repaired, as its armour had been badly dented in several places by the German shells.

Both Astakhov and the crews of the tanks under repair were exasperated, and they called the Germans every name under the sun for not waiting until the repairs were completed. Astakhov himself was thoroughly upset. He felt ashamed to take a machine from one of the commanders, but not to take part in the battle seemed to him the worst shame of all.

"Look here, Astakhov," said the battalion commander, seeing how keenly he felt about it, "you can direct the tank battle from the ground, from the infantry commander's observation post nearest to the battlefield."

Astakhov cheered up. The ex-infantryman, the company commander in him, exalted. Now at the most critical moment he'd be able to fling the tankmen to the aid of the infantry, wherever they would be most needed.

It was nearing five-thirty in the morning. The dark-blue sky, almost as black as the night-sky, still glittered with silver stars. The round full moon, fading with the dawn, sank in the west. The air was clear and frosty, with an unmistakable smell of spring. The fragrant odour of resin melting at noon floated in the air.

Concealing themselves in the small wood the tankmen warmed up their engines, greedily inhaling, after the benzine fumes, the healthy forest air. All the tanks were ready for battle, split up into groups and occupying the initial positions for their forthcoming operations.

Punctually at five-thirty came the familiar wailing roar of German bombers from the west. Dive-bombing of positions invariably heralded the enemy attacks. The roar grew greater and more thunderous. Here they were over us already, an enormous flock of yellow-winged, black-bellied machines. They formed a circle preparing to dive. Now in a second their black maws would open and their deadly load would drop. The question was—just where would the bombs land?

Their foul, evil-looking tails and wings darkened the skies. The twinkling morning stars seemed to have been extinguished, hidden behind their silhouettes.

The first three planes, describing their last circle in the sky, dived with a shrill whine onto the fringes of our wood, and we heard a dozen or so deafening explosions. We waited for the next. But neither explosions nor dive-bombers followed up the attack. A group of our fighter-planes had made a surprise swoop on the air pirates and drawn them off to one side. And the sky, which only a moment ago had been defiled by the dirty-yellow silhouettes of the fascist Junkers, immediately cleared, and the stars reappeared to cheer us with their gentle twinkling.

Orders came from Colonel Katenin at the H.Q. post to advance several hundred yards, in order to prepare for a counter-attack against the enemy.

Our airmen had successfully prevented the fascist planes from giving our section the necessary 'softening-up' in order to make their required break-through. So now their artillery tried to do it instead. Under cover of heavy artillery fire vast masses of enemy infantry flung themselves against our line of defence. Through the chatter of the machine-guns and the roar of exploding shells the dull growl of the tank engines reached our ears.

"Ah well, the German piglets have started to trot," joked Driver Konstantinov. "We'll roast them, just wait till we take off."

Konstantinov's experienced ear had guessed from the sound of the engines that the enemy tanks only numbered about five, all of medium or heavy weight.

Meanwhile Astakhov, in charge of a group of tanks, stayed constantly at the side of the commander of the infantry battalion, and from time to time informed his group how the operations were proceeding.

In one sector, superior enemy forces succeeded in pressing back our troops and even in occupying one village. Of this village, it should be mentioned, there had long since been nothing left except the name. All the cottages and buildings had been razed to the ground by fire. But close by was a road junction, over which the German troops might thrust so as to develop their success in the break-through. Colonel Katenin considered this junction and its approaches to be the most important sector of the line and this was what the tankmen had to hold at all costs.

Suddenly six German medium and heavy tanks tore out from deep in the German rear, making a rush for the village. The cross-roads could only be reached through the village.

"It's time," decided the colonel and, exchanging a significant glance with the commander of the formation, gave his orders; Lukyanov's group, together with the infantry, were detailed to attack the village and intercept the tanks.

On our left came the roar of engines—our infantry had mounted the attack for the village and were supported by six armoured fortresses.

A violent battle followed. The Germans were extremely reluctant to give up the sector they had only just won. Their anti-tank guns and mortars pounded our machines remorselessly, tank-busters armed with grenades flung themselves against our tanks, but they were unable to halt our advance. The battle moved forward to the village itself, but the German tanks, grouped just behind it, still hesitated, unable to make up their minds to engage in the very thick of the fighting.

"The devils, they're waiting their chance!" exclaimed Katenin, and simultaneously flung an order to the signaller: "Tell Azobkov and Astakhov not to worry. What are they fussing about? Their time will come, when the order is given, they can step on it."

Azobkov and Astakhov were in command of groups of heavy tanks, and lay in ambush, ready at an instant's notice to rush to the aid of the others.

With hand-grenades and bayonets, to the accompaniment of ringing shouts echoing over the whole area, our rifle battalions hounded the Germans out of the village. Evidently this was the moment which the fascist tanks had been waiting for: splitting into two groups, they raced out to encircle the village, with the object either of squeezing all in it in their pincers, or else by this manoeuvre to break through to the road junction. Lukyanov's tanks saw through their plans and, likewise splitting into two, thrust forward to cut off the Germans, opening fire against the flanks while still in motion. And so in two places there were engagements with three tanks on either side. The forces were equal, but from the very first shots the success was ours: two German machines were set ablaze while driving at full speed, two

more had their tracks damaged, while the other two tried to race back as quickly as they could. We lost only one tank.

"Well, so far you lads have done well," said Colonel Katenin with satisfaction.

Later he repeated this praise, when the infantry commanders reported that thanks to the tankmen they had finally been able to occupy the village, and that moreover with their fire and caterpillar tracks the tanks had silenced nine German guns.

In the meantime the battle raged with unabated violence. Attack followed counter-attack incessantly on both sides.

Astakhov sent in a report:

"Eight German tanks are outflanking us."

From the H.Q. post instructions were hastily sent to Shlyapnikov, commander of a tank group: "Go into battle."

Shlyapnikov had also got eight tanks. And so for the second time to-day the balance of forces was equal. But thanks to his close contact with the infantry and their scouts, Astakhov was in possession of fresh information:

"The movement of a big group of tanks has been observed in the west, five to seven kilometres away."

Katenin was a bit worried. Hastily he switched his glance from the map to the field, and then back again to the map. "The devils, they're sending 'em over in waves, instead of sending 'em all out at once; it doesn't seem like them, somehow," pondered the colonel.

"Well, we'll soon put an end to that game; we'll knock 'em out in waves, that's all."

Orders to Azobkov: immediately the eight tanks engage in battle strike at the Germans from the flank. Orders to Astakhov: close the road, send the whole of your group there and hold up the approach of the third German tank group.

The roar of the engines from the machines which were not yet in sight grew louder every moment. The artillery kept up a constant barrage, with shells exploding right and left. Suddenly everything became confused. Eight German tanks appeared in a clearing on one of the heights, in a wedge formation, looking like cranes against the sky. They attacked our infantry at full speed. But our tanks thrust out, to make a frontal attack. Fast and furious was their approach. The distance between the opponents melted as a taper melts in the fire, and it seemed as if they meant to ram each other. But the Germans were unable to stick it out, and they came to a stop. At a distance of 200 yards they fired one concerted salvo. This salvo was the beginning of a furious tank battle. A solid cannonade started. Individual machines attempted to manoeuvre. The smoke from the guns and the exhaust fumes lay thick over the battlefield. It was impossible to distinguish our own tanks from those of the Germans. The tank battle, though only small groups took part, overshadowed all the other fighting going on around us.

The general infantry battle was hardly felt on the field, all that one felt was the tank battle, the battle of armoured giants.

Colonel Katenin wanted only one thing—to crush the eight fascist tanks as quickly as possible, in the shortest space of time. He never for a moment doubted the success of the engagement, but it had to be fought out swiftly, while Astakhov still held up the main German tank group on the forest road.

Now we saw why the colonel didn't want Azobkov's three 'K.V.'s kept in ambush a minute longer. Our eight could have dealt with the German eight well enough, but time was precious. The 'K.V.' monsters hurled themselves on the mass of German machines. Four German tanks burst into vivid flames before the eyes of our attacking infantry, who greeted the victory with frantic cheers, from all sides of the field. The remaining four enemy tanks tried to escape, but they too were caught and blown up by our shells. Two of our medium tanks were put out of action, the rest were ready to continue the battle.

However, there was no need for them to continue it. The third German wave of sixteen tanks met Astakhov on the road, barring their advance. Astakhov had only three tanks, while the Germans had five times as many. One 'K.V.' was commanded by Mashchev, a former Red Army artilleryman, now promoted to lieutenant, who used to be in the commissar's tank; he took the place of the wounded Chilikin.

Before leaving their ambush Senior Lieutenant Astakhov told Mashchev: "You're to be in command of the tank carrying out a spearhead action. You remember how with Chilikin we flogged the anti-tank guns? Well, then, now you'll stand on the road and strike the German tanks from the front. You may die, but at all costs hold on to your position."

"Trust me, sir. I won't budge an inch," answered Mashchev, and set out with his crew to take up the honoured post.

While the tank battle raged behind him, Mashchev acted like a real spearhead, cutting down the leading machines of the third German tank wave which attempted to break through to the battlefield. The disabled enemy tanks blocked the road for their own troops. Infuriated, the fascists wheeled out two anti-tank guns against Mashchev. But the tank stood firm and indomitable, like a powerful fortress; never gave an inch of ground, never ceased its devastating fire. As a last resort the Germans even made a desperate attempt to capture our gallant tankmen with their infantry, but these rats were quickly dealt with by the two baby tanks attached to the 'K.V.' especially as cover.

Yet another salvo of anti-tank shells was hurled against the heroic machine. Engineer Knutov was deafened by one exploding right over his hatch. He tried to look out of the spy-hole and shouted with all his might to the tank-commander:

"Stop! Don't fire! The gun's damaged!"

An enemy shell had hit the muzzle of the gun and dented it. If the tankmen had fired another shot the shell would have exploded in the gun-barrel, causing the destruction of the machine and the death of the crew.

"Things aren't so good," thought the tank commander with disappointment. They went on firing at the Germans with their machine-guns.

Soon fresh tanks came to relieve Mashchev, but the Germans had already fallen back a fair distance from the scene of the battle.

In addition to the disabled gun, three of the fortress-tank's track wheels were smashed. We tried to count the dents in the armour made by the German shells - there were dozens of them but though the shells had bitten into the Soviet armour they had been unable to pierce it.

"Yes, brother, you're in a bad way," sympathized one of the comrades.

"A tank without guns is no tank, it's only a log," added another voice.

And so the machine was put out of action. It needed factory repairs - the gun had to be replaced. Mashchev went on cursing the Germans, continually walking round and round his tank, and gazing intently at the disfigured gun-barrel. Then he began taking measurements and making calculations, clearly obsessed with the single thought: how to force the tank back into battle.

It was common knowledge that as regards inventiveness Mashchev was a second Dormidontov. He'd always have a brain wave in an emergency! And now Mashchev stood eagerly at attention before Company Commander Astakhov;

"Comrade Senior Lieutenant! Allow me to saw off the end of the gun-barrel, to a length of 22 centimetres. It'll fire all right and we won't have to send it back to the factory."

"That's a bright idea," Astakhov agreed, instantly appreciating the value of the suggestion.

It was clear to ex-gunner Mashchev that despite its shortened gun-barrel, the tank would still be able to fire at the enemy even over the longest distances, a fact which Senior Lieutenant Astakhov also realized.

The tank was taken back to the rear. While the repair team changed the track wheels, Mashchev got hold of a couple of hand-saws and started to saw off the damaged barrel-end. The tankmen worked steadily for twelve hours without a break. Buckets of soap-suds were continually poured over the heated hand-saws to cool them. The men took turns to rest and eat, but the sawing never stopped for a single moment.

The next day Mashchev's tank went into action with the rest and continued to hammer the fascists effectively with its well-directed fire, this time from the short-cut barrel.

That day the crew disabled an enemy heavy tank as well as a light tank, and also added to the number of Germans killed during the past two days' fighting. Altogether in our sector of the front lay 2,500 fascist corpses - the result of the enemy's attempt to make a break-through to his 16th Army.

CHAPTER XVIII

"BOOTY"

THE LOSS OF NO. 512

THE 'K.V.' tanks broke into the village. The air vibrated with rifle fire interspersed with the chatter of machine-guns, and the thud of exploding hand-grenades. In the next village two or three cottages which the retreating Germans had set on fire blazed like vivid beacons against the sky. Huge tongues of flame, fanned by the strong wind, greedily licked the heavy hoar-frost from the branches of some near-by poplars. Tank Commander Kalinichev, speeding past the burning cottages and trees, thought grimly to himself: "If only those were German pigs instead of the poplars, I'd make them hug the fire till their eyes popped like chestnuts . . ."

But this was only a passing thought. A second later, the commander's eyes were again straining ahead, peering down the smoke-filled street into the lanes beyond, where the stubborn Fritzes were still lurking and putting up a last resistance. Every now and then he would shout to Driver Dormidontov: "Stop! I'm firing!" And immediately send a shell hurtling against the corner of a stone cellar in which some Germans had taken cover. A direct hit, and the cellar was no longer a cellar, but a grave for the inhabitants.

The machines sped on, continuing the good work. In the passion of fighting the crews were conscious of nothing but the grenade throwers hurling bombs against their armour and of the still firing anti-tank guns, which had to be reduced and crushed relentlessly.

Suddenly, in the midst of this seething sea of fire and death, Driver Dormidontov caught sight of a huge dog, prowling from one cottage to the next—a big, handsome, reddish pointer. Like a creature possessed, the dog ran in and out of the empty cottages and dashed up to each German soldier fleeing past him.

"Here, I'll soon have him paws up," exclaimed radio-operator-gunner Shishov, bending over his machine-gun.

"You're crazy. He's a dog, not a fascist," growled Dormidontov angrily, nudging Shishov.

For a moment Shishov delayed pulling the trigger, and the resounding burst that followed just caught two German grenade-throwers who had rushed out from behind the corner of a house.

"There are your curs; always aim at them, keep your eye stuck to the sights," remarked Dormidontov to Shishov merrily.

The fighting in the street had quietened down perceptibly, but the dog still went on prowling through the village, sniffing pathetically at the bodies of the dead Germans. Evidently the poor beast was looking for his master.

The battle died down; the village was ours. At the very first opportunity Dormidontov asked the tank commander to give him permission to get out "and have a look at the dog."

In less than twenty minutes Dormidontov appeared on the threshold of the cottage in which we were now resting, accompanied by the submissive dog. The tankmen soon began their good-natured leg-pulling:

"Where did you get your prisoner from? He's a lad, is our Gene!"

"Come on 'Fritz,' 'Fritz' come over here!"

"Give us a paw, 'Ginger,' give a paw!"

Despite the great strength clearly shown in his muscular body the thorough-bred pointer rolled his eyes wildly and fearfully in every direction, as though he really and truly felt himself a prisoner of war.

Dormidontov, however, had clearly done something in the street to win the dog's confidence and after throwing a few more suspicious glances at the rest of us, he pressed close against Eugen's legs, his head reaching right up to his waist. Dormidontov petted the dog and signed to him to sit down beside him. The pointer obediently lay down, but was still upset. He shivered from time to time, the whole of his vigorous, smooth-coated body quivering, his big head jerking towards the noise of the crowd.

The flattened ears pricked up slightly, and his powerful jaws curled, disclosing the sharp, gleaming-white fangs. The well-fed, smooth-haired dog shone from the tips of his ears to the tip of his tail, but his understanding light-brown eyes were still clouded with fear.

"Look, boys, he's a German dog—see, here's his number and name on his collar," exclaimed Dormidontov.

They'd all noticed the white disc on the dog's collar, with a number and inscription stamped on it.

"Probably belonged to some officer or other," remarked one of the lads.

"Obviously," agreed Konstantinov. "His master's probably hanging around in some gutter or other, the stinking cur, while this thorough-bred dog warms himself with us."

They all burst out laughing.

"Don't forget I saved the dog's life," Dormidontov broke in. "Shishov here wanted to shoot him along with the rest of the curs."

And the tankmen looked at Shishov reproachfully.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Shishov. Fancy comparing such a beautiful dog to the fascists . . ."

"Look here, boys," went on Dormidontov, "I'm going to look after the dog. The commander has already given me permission to let him stay with the battalion."

"Then we must give him a name," said someone, and suggestions came flying from all sides: "Fascist," "Bandit," "Adolf," "Hitler," "Goebbels," and hundreds more of a similar kind.

"No, boys, they're no damn good at all," Dormidontov interrupted, with a merry twinkle in his blue eyes, and drawled in a mock-serious and reprobative voice:

"Comrades, comrades! Surely you wouldn't for a moment seriously suggest that such names are suitable for the dog. Why, they're an insult to him."

A loud burst of laughter drowned his words.

"What shall we call His Highness then?" asked the tankmen.

"I'll tell you what," Eugen went on. "We've captured him just like any other German property. He's our booty, well then, how about it—'Booty'."

The lads instantly shouted out "Booty," "Booty," all of them delighted with the new name.

Several months had passed since the memorable day when we took the dog prisoner. Booty refused to leave the battalion. He soon got used to his new name and became close pals with Dormidontov. Whenever Dormidontov was engaged in battle he pined sadly with the second echelon.

The tankmen took to Booty and the dog to them. They were all pleased with him because he was never any bother to anyone; he never begged anyone for food until dinner-time or supper-time arrived. At dinner-time Booty and his master would set off for the field-kitchen, where he'd eat whatever they gave him, out of his tin basin. If Eugen was absent Booty would go to the kitchen on his own and the cook would feed him.

The dog earned his food. When a detachment of tankmen set out on sentry duty it was invariably accompanied by Booty. He'd stay with the sentries, prowling round the tanks, peering under them; now and again he'd go off for short walks in various directions, sniffing, listening for strangers.

The tankmen praised him: "He's a fine, serviceable dog."

"What if he runs off from your post back to his old masters," said one of the lads, teasing Dormidontov. This made Eugen think long and seriously. "I'll have to train the dog better," he said to himself, and started spending more time with Booty, to train him.

Booty learned to carry reports from the company to the second echelon, to carry a machine-gun drum wrapped in rags in his teeth, to carry a tommy-gun by its strap.

"Still, you daren't send him for your dinner. He'd never hold out, he'd eat it on the road," said the lads spitefully.

Booty's devotion and loyalty to his new master grew day by day. Before setting off for battle, Eugen would give his friend a farewell stroking, shake his paw, pat him, and pop a lump of sugar in his mouth. And when all five 'K.V.' tanks returned from battle at the same time and approached their base, Booty would shoot off, pointing straight for Dormidontov's tank, never making a mistake.

"Here, Booty, my lovely, climb up here," Dormidontov would call out caressingly from the hatch, shutting off the engine.

Booty would make the tank in one leap, and thrust his muzzle into the hatch, rubbing himself lovingly against the helmet and the grimy, barely recognizable face of his friend and master.

Once, when the lads were at it again, teasing Dormidontov about sending Booty for his dinner, Eugen lost his patience and said with determination:

"I'll send him right away. In ten minutes he'll have it here."

A furious argument arose among the tankmen as to whether Booty would fetch his dinner or eat it.

Dormidontov gave Booty his billy-can to carry and pointed him to the kitchen, a kilometre away in the woods. On the order "Off!" Booty wagged his tail and streaked off into the trees. The lads who had to go and fetch their dinners themselves, waited impatiently for the dog's return.

At last Booty came racing from the outskirts of the wood. Running up to his master he obediently placed the billy-can containing the meat soup covered with grease-proof paper at Dormidontov's feet.

"There, what did I tell you?" gloated Dormidontov.

"Bravo, bravo, Gene! Bravo, Booty!" cheered the lads, and walked off laughing and joking to get their own dinners.

Day by day the battles became more and more violent. Sometimes Dormidontov's tank was absent from its base for two or three days running, and the pining Booty would prowl about restlessly. He had already made several attempts to run away to the front lines, but unable to find any trace of his master, he would make his way back, mournful and hungry.

But there was one occasion when the indefatigable Booty discovered the tracks of the tanks and broke through to the battlefield. Our tanks were fighting German tanks at the time. All the tankmen saw Booty, saw how he became confused by the explosions among the machines and how he finally ran off in the direction of the Germans.

For five days Booty was lost, and they all thought he'd got killed or even worse (and this Dormidontov would not hear of on any account), that he'd deserted to the Germans. Dormidontov felt the loss of his pal keenly. He could not believe that Booty had betrayed him; Booty had undoubtedly lost his life.

However greatly the boys felt tempted to take advantage of their joking remark about Booty being a deserter, out of respect for Eugen's feelings no one said a word.

Suddenly the joyful news that Booty had returned spread throughout the battalion. Dormidontov was the first out of the dug-out to greet his pet. Booty slunk in, dirty, head hanging, limping on one leg. His paws were bleeding, and covered with small bruises, evidently from the sharp spring ice into which he must have fallen in his wanderings.

"Poor old Booty!" Dormidontov hugged his pal with tears in his eyes.

Whining pathetically, and wagging his tail, Booty pressed close to his master.

Shishov was the first to dare reproach the animal.

"Well, well, you son of a dog! So you didn't find it too sweet back there with your old masters. You've come back as starving as a German. Times are changed now. You won't run away any more."

"It's a wonder the curs didn't eat him, the poor brute," someone added.

"So the dog has completely forsaken them, it's quite plain he doesn't want to keep company with them any more," remarked Konstantinov.

A few days later Booty had completely recovered, and cheered up; his paws had healed and he was ready once more to serve his beloved master.

One night all five 'K.V.' tanks were called out, on an alarm, to the forward positions. The crews made a rush for the machines, and started up the engines instantaneously, waiting for the order to engage the enemy. As usual, Dormidontov found time to climb out of his tank and shake hands with Booty, who hung around as always. The other members of the crew—Kalinichev, Shishov, Solovyov, Pisaryev—also spoke to Booty. They enjoyed the privilege of Booty's preference for them over the other crews; the dog was fully aware that they were his master's companions and his best friends. The lads themselves jokingly called the dog the sixth member of their crew.

The tanks set off for battle.

The Germans were determined to regain an advantageous water position which they had just lost to us. So they decided to mount a powerful attack. This was the battle to which our tanks were called out.

After two hours of fighting the enemy turned tail. The five 'K.V.s' fought well. Lieutenant Kalinichev's machine, with the big 512 on the turret, aroused universal admiration. The driver-virtuoso Eugen Dormidontov would first rush into the German rear, then a second later we'd see him on the flank of the German battle formations. The crew had long been famed for its specially skilful crushing of German guns and mortars. Even the crushing of guns has to be carried out with skill, for the strongest caterpillar tracks can be torn to bits.

So here was the mighty Dormidontov, shattering them with his sudden appearances first on the right, then on the left. A light pressure on the gun wheel, a break, and the gun would be a gun no longer, but a steel corpse—there was no need to crush either the barrel or the carriage.

Kalinichev's tank crushed about a dozen small and medium-sized enemy guns and an equal number of mortars. When the pursuit of the enemy started his machine had shot far ahead.

The battle came to an end, but still Commander Kalinichev's and Driver Dornidontov's tank did not return. However much Booty prowled round, however much he sniffed the other machines, which had returned, he was unable to find his master. His master was left somewhere on the field.

With each passing hour the fate of the machine caused increasing concern among the command and the tankmen. There wasn't a tank to be seen on the ground between our forward units and the Germans.

"He's got too deep into the German lines, and has probably been disabled there," was the unwelcome thought in the mind of the commander of the five 'K.V.s'.

Two hours passed, then three, ten, twelve hours, but still there was no sign of Kalinichev's tank. Several pairs of scouts—a tankman and an infantryman, set off, made their way to the German positions, but were unable to find the machine; it seemed to have dropped right through the ground.

Then someone in the battalion suggested that Booty should be sent in search of the tank. "He'll recognize it from a distance, and the Germans won't touch him, he's wearing a disc."

Early in the morning, before the first glimmer of a rosy dawn had broken through in the east, Booty was taken out of the trench and shown one of the tracks left by the tanks which led in the direction of the German lines. He was told: "Go and search."

Booty seemed to have been waiting for this. The clever dog set off as fast as his legs could carry him, his instinct telling him that all he had to do was just one thing, to search for his beloved master.

A few hours later Booty appeared at the tanks' assembly point. The first man he saw he seized by the overalls with his teeth, and started dragging him.

"He's found him, he must have found him!" exclaimed the tankmen, surprised and overjoyed.

Scouts Valin, Arovsky and Malchenko set off behind Booty, who led them towards the forward positions. The dog's path lay far ahead, pointing right towards the Germans. Intermittent rifle and machine-gun shots came from this direction, and it was not without danger. But Booty determinedly pushed forward. Running ahead about ten paces he'd glance back and if the men didn't seem to be coming along behind him, he would run back with sharp angry yaps as if he were urging them to follow him once again.

The boys decided to go on a little further. Crouching low, they crept through the low shrubs, following where Booty led. But they'd barely advanced a hundred feet before Booty himself stopped them. Flattening himself on the ground and placing his forepaws on a black object, the dog turned his head in the direction of the scouts. The men came closer: before them lay the body of a tankman wearing overalls, helmet and gloves—Vanya Pisarev, gunner of the Kalinichev-Dornidontov tank.

"Vanyushka, what could have brought you to this!" said one of the scouts in a sad whisper.

Pisaryev's body had been riddled with bullets. Tucked away in his shirt we found documents, the diaries of the whole crew. He must have been making his way back at night from the tank, to let us know of their mishap, and been killed on the way by the Germans.

The questions which the scouts wanted answered were, what had happened to the others, whether they were still alive, and where they'd got to. If only there had been even a tiny note, but there was nothing.

Among the packets of papers and documents they found Dormidontov's big leather wallet. Booty kept on worrying and sniffing each new article taken out of Pisaryev's overalls, and suddenly he snatched the wallet out of the men's hands and, growling savagely, leapt to one side. Nothing at that moment could have forced him to part with this valuable burden. He kept it in his powerful jaws and with hackles bristling ran around the scouts in ever-widening circles.

In another minute Booty was off like a streak of greased lightning, running in the direction of the Germans.

"What's he up to? The dog must have gone mad!" exclaimed Arovsky in perplexity.

"Can't you understand—he's on Pisaryev's track. He'll find the tank in a jiffy," said Malchenko confidently.

The boys squatted on their heels waiting to see what would happen. Only a few moments passed before the Germans caught sight of them and opened fire. They had to move back.

An hour later Booty reappeared, still carrying the wallet in his teeth. This time he laid his burden at the scouts' feet of his own accord and stood stock-still, waiting expectantly.

They opened the wallet and, to their delight, there was a tiny slip of paper, a note signed by tank commander Kalinichev:

" . . . send us something, anything. Even if it's only by Booty. We're still alive. Firing our last ammunition. We've killed about a hundred of the brutes, but we're not surrendering and shall never surrender. Kalinichev."

Now they all remembered that Booty was able to carry machine-gun drums and automatic rifles. It seemed almost as though Dormidontov had foreseen his misfortune and had trained the dog for this very purpose.

The scouts quickly got a drum from the infantrymen and wrapped it in a rag. As soon as Booty had the drum between his teeth he knew what he had to do. He was off like a shot from a gun, in the direction pointed out to him, following his own fresh tracks.

The clever, brave pointer made three trips with drums in his jaws. The tank appeared to be about three kilometres inside enemy territory. The third time Booty returned with his coat singed in several places, carrying a note attached to his collar:

"Dear Comrades! Thank you. Thank you, Booty! What a dog! He's helped us shoot about another fifty bloody curs. Good-bye,

lads! These are our last moments. They're pouring petrol over. We'll die, but victory is with us. Greetings to our families. We're putting Booty into the lower hatch. He'll break through. Farewell! Kalinichev, Dormidontov, Shishov, Solovyov."

A week later we had driven back the Germans still farther and occupied the spot where the heroic tank No. 512 had met its fate. Both tracks had been damaged, and the Nazis had poured petrol over it and set it alight.

This was the way they died, the supremely loyal crew of one 'K.V.' tank, one of the five machines which had made the glorious journey from the Urals to Staraya Russa.

Thus ended the gallant life of Gene Dormidontov, the battalion's merry-maker and favourite.

The steel grave of the four heroic tankmen still stands in the field, like a black cliff. The men often come here, taking off their helmets and honouring the memory of their friends who died so heroically. And with them always comes Dormidontov's four-footed friend—the dog Booty, loved by the entire battalion.

CHAPTER XIX

THE FORGE OF FEARLESSNESS

LIKE the whole of the tank battalion, Astakhov's 'K.V.' tank company not only fights but also teaches others how to fight. The battalion is something in the nature of a front-line tank academy.

In view of the special services performed by Maximov's battalion and its extensive experience in fighting the German troops, the Front H.Q. has decided to put tank reservists through it, to train drivers, radio-operators, gunners, commanders of tank and of tank detachments.

"You're to turn the tankmen and commanders into real experts at their jobs. That's what the People's Commissar demands," was what Colonel Katenin told the battalion commander. "But you're not released from participation in the day-to-day fighting."

To teach others! Yet how long ago is it since the tankmen of the battalion, when they arrived at the front, were still considered green. I recall their first meeting with the old war-horse, front-line tankman Major Segeda, with his tales of fearlessness, of ways of destroying the Germans.

"And what if the tank's disabled?" one of the tankmen timidly asked the major.

"Then it's got to be repaired. Repaired immediately."

"What if they're still firing?"

"Then you repair it under fire and get into action again quickly."

"But you might be wounded!"

"Friend," said Segeda, looking at the young tankman with a good-natured smile, "you might even get killed in war. Sure, even such things have happened."

The men burst out laughing.

Since then barely six months have passed, yet what a number of changes have taken place, how many villages and miles of country have been captured from the enemy; in how many countless places has our armour been dented by the enemy shells!

Lieutenant Astakhov's 'K.V.' company had lived through many bitter days during those six months: Tank Commander Chilikin had been wounded, also Kononov and Mashchev; gallant Commissar Kharchenko had been killed in a decisive engagement, the heroic Kalinichev-Dormidontov tank crew had been burned alive,

And still the fighting continued, and still the record of exploits by each crew continued to grow. Hundreds and thousands of invaders had been killed, dozens of guns as well as enemy tanks and pill-boxes had been crushed and disabled. The Company has become moulded and steeled in the fire of the Patriotic War. Each fighter has become an increasingly stern, fearless expert at his job, capable of passing his knowledge on to others.

Engineers and drivers, gunners, radio-operators, commanders of tanks and of tank detachments, posted to the battalion for a refresher-training course, learned—not without satisfaction—that Senior Lieutenant Astakhov, commander of the five 'K.V.' tanks and not unknown for his exploits at the front, was to be in charge.

Astakhov's first encounter with the participants in the course was a friendly one, but marked with mutual confusion. He was well aware that all the tankmen present had either lost their tanks—out-of-date types—in battle, or else had cut their way out of enemy encirclement, fighting in rifle units.

"What were you, and what type of machine did you have?" he asked Sergeant Vershinin.

"Driver-engineer," came the reply, and Vershinin enumerated several types of machines he had driven.

"In what capacity have you been fighting recently?"

Although a little embarrassed at the question the tankman went on firmly:

"I was in the infantry, Comrade Senior Lieutenant. First as a rifleman, then as a mortar-gunner, after that I was wounded near Klin."

"On foot in tank fashion, as they say. Never mind, you'll soon be driving a tank again—and what a machine!"

"Glad to hear it, Comrade Senior Lieutenant. Very many thanks. The sooner the better."

Junior Sergeant Gutt had also fought with the infantry after having

been a tankman; he'd been a scout, then a destroyer of enemy tanks. Other tankmen had become signallers, mortar-gunned, artillerymen. They all spoke enthusiastically about their fighting with these different arms, but at the same time they admitted frankly that their "hearts stopped beating" with envy and regret when they were passed by a tank. Every tankman's heart was heavy with longing for his machine. So it was hardly surprising that on the very day of their arrival in the battalion the first thing they did was to make straight for the tanks, not leaving them till late at night.

After a brief talk the tankmen asked Astakhov to show them the tanks of his own company and especially his machine, in which, as they knew, he had spent two days encircled by the enemy. Then it was Astakhov's turn to feel embarrassed. As it happened his tank was undergoing repairs and had not taken part in the recent fighting at all.

"Never mind, later on I'll show it to you properly," promised Astakhov.

To-day one company of light tanks set off for battle, at the same time intensive training had been going on in the other companies since early morning. Both the men who have come for a refresher-course and those who fight every day were taking part.

Here we are in a class conducted by Astakhov. He's inside a tank, surrounded by a small group of commanders. They too are students—commanders of tanks and tank detachments. One after the other they climb into Astakhov's machine through the upper hatch, and after a short spell climb out again through the driver-engineer's hatch. This is what Astakhov calls "putting them through the tank."

Flushed and blinking in the bright daylight, each man who has been 'put through' passes on his impressions, full of admiration of the quality of the equipment, especially the armament.

"Fine lads they are, the workers in the evacuated factory who built these tanks. We owe our thanks to the Urals workers; they'll do anything we want—but we must hit out even harder at the Germans, have no mercy." Tank-Lieutenant Belokon could not keep back his appreciation.

In accordance with the programme and time-table, those participating in the course take tactics, study the equipment, driving, firing in action, and finally, as a kind of 'passing-out' exam, have an 'exercise' participation in real battle. If you're victorious, then you've passed the exam—here's your diploma—take a machine and drive it yourself.

Senior Driver-Engineer Konstantinov, whom we had dubbed 'Professor of Driving and Equipment,' was now taking these subjects with the driver-engineers.

Nearby, in the woods, is the tank repair base. They all know Konstantinov there, and he knows all the repair-hands.

"We'll help repair the tanks, there's no better training," he declared.

to his pupils, and grabbing a handful of tools led them into the woods.

Lieutenant Efimov's 'K.V.' tank had returned from action with its gun turret shattered by a thermite shell. The crew themselves were uninjured, but the turret was stuck and it was impossible to fire the gun. This meant a very serious repair job, involving the dismounting of the turret, and the re-welding of the damaged armour.

"We'll do the repairs ourselves, let the lads learn," said Battalion Commander Maximov.

And so Efimov's crew together with the post-graduates got down to work. There was no such thing as a crane in the battalion, but there were plenty of strong oaks growing close by. The tank was set up between a couple of oak-trees and the turret, weighing many tons, was carefully removed and suspended. The hole was skilfully welded over by the tankmen themselves; in a few days the seriously wounded tank had completely recovered!

The Battalion Commander's order read thus: "For self-sacrificing work in repairing the disabled machine, and for the skilful training of participants in the course on this tank, I express thanks to Efimov's crew."

The post-graduates heartily congratulated the commander of the machine. Delighted, Efimov answered:

"Though the Battalion Commander has not expressed his thanks to you, you will be able to thank yourselves that now you have something on which to train and with which to take your exams. And so, you've done a real job of work for yourselves."

The infantry and tank commanders, and especially Astakhov himself, give the classes in tactics and co-ordination of various units.

"Hand-grenades and tommy-guns to be taken. When the alarm is given we're setting off for battle—tactical exercises. The Germans have hurled in tanks. We'll see how they come off against our machines."

That night, a group of tankmen led by Astakhov arrived at the forward lines and entrenched themselves in the vicinity of the Regimental Commander's H.Q.

Events developed towards morning. The Germans had prepared a counter-offensive, supported by their tanks and aircraft. After a preliminary air attack the German infantry and tanks hurled themselves against our advance lines. Our infantry and artillery met them with a storm of fire.

"Watch the tanks! Watch the tanks!" shouted Astakhov for the umpteenth time to his neighbours in the trench.

Several of the leading German machines attacking our troops were immediately disabled by our anti-tank guns. The rest engaged nine of our tanks which had rushed out from the wood. A tank battle followed on the field. Smoke smothered everything. The first wounded were brought into headquarters, groaning. Astakhov

ordered the tankmen to dress their wounds and to keep their grenades and tommy-guns at the ready.

In fact from that moment Astakhov became the assistant commander of the regiment, responsible for the direction of the action. A few yards from the commander a communications junction had been broken. Astakhov gave the order to some of his men to help restore communications. He then organized a circular defence of H.Q. from among the tankmen. That they were here for exercises no longer entered any of their heads. All the men here were fighters—active participants in a violent battle.

Suddenly Major Pavlov, commander of the regiment, groaned with pain. He had been wounded in both legs. Quickly, bandages and stretchers were brought up. Astakhov dressed the Major's wounds, and then those of five more commanders, and sent them back to the rear.

At this moment he felt grateful for the lessons he had had from his wife, Doctor's-Assistant Lena Astakhov. Back there in the Urals she would be proud to know that her labours had not been in vain.

For a whole hour Astakhov took the place of the regimental commander and directed the battle, until finally communications were restored and he had called for replacements from H.Q. for the commanders who were out of action.

Our troops successfully repulsed the German counter-offensive and then themselves went over to the offensive and continued their westward advance.

That day the tankmen managed to pay a visit to the battlefield, now quiet, where only so recently tanks had fought against tanks. The four fascist machines, marked with crosses, were now as still as the tomb. The crews of two of our disabled tanks were pottering around their machines.

Pupils and teachers, recognizing one another, were overjoyed.

"Can we give you any help?"

"We're all right, we're finishing now. Then we'll set off straight away. You'd better help the Germans, over there, to resurrect themselves," called out Driver-Engineer Trofimov merrily from his hatch.

The 'post-graduates' studied the German machines carefully, examining the holes we'd made in them; with their own hands they examined the damaged tanks and memorized the most vulnerable spots.

The next day all the other groups of tankmen took turns to acquaint themselves with these machines. The cemetery for fascist tanks even began to figure in the time-table of studies, with the modest title of 'Field Class No. 6.' There would be many more such 'classes.'

Some time back, guest-tanks had appeared at the front; oval and squat, with a quiet engine hidden deep in their armoured bellies. These were not Soviet-produced tanks. They were included in the

fighting teams, but they did not play a very hot part in the first engagements after their arrival, they did not show much fighting spirit; they seemed to be taking a tourist's stroll over the battlefield.

The crews in the machines were entirely Soviet.

"When are our 'little brothers' going to show us what they can do?" the tankmen asked one another impatiently.

They were talking about the guest-tanks, affectionately called 'little brothers' in these parts. They had been sent from friendly Britain, and at first our Soviet tankmen, not yet quite familiar with their ways, naturally displayed excessive caution and wariness in handling them.

But now the 'little brothers' are no longer distinguishable from the others on the battlefield, it is impossible to tell which machines fight with greater ferocity and courage—ours or the English. Both are manned by brave Soviet men, who have become thoroughly well acquainted with their equipment.

One day, early in the spring, we had one of our usual engagements with Germans of the encircled 16th Army. The day before, the 'K.V.' tankmen had asked the commanders—"What about our 'little brothers,' are they taking part?"

"Without fail," answered Kordov, the commander of the English tank group. "There'll be some in each echelon."

About fifty tanks were concentrated in the forest, to thrust into the attack. It was not a thick wood, dry and sere; yet suddenly green shoots appeared—thick firs and broad-flung branches of pine made an excellent screen for the tank ambush.

"Spring is here," was what the German observer would probably think, looking at the wood through his binoculars.

In the distant sky came first the hum and then the roar of many engines. Our bombers and attack planes were off to give battle. Wing-tip to wing-tip, flight by flight, at the side of Soviet fighter-planes flew the elongated English Hurricanes, bearing the same markings—five-pointed red stars.

Tankman Krugly remarked with admiration: "It does your heart good to see how they harmonise, how well they work together in the sky."

"Well, soon we tankmen will set off, and I bet we won't harmonise any worse than those planes do," answered driver-engineer Granatkin.

The first bomb explosions reached our ears from the distance in the direction of the enemy, and the machine-guns started up. Two green rockets flashed through the sky—the signal for the tank attack. And then the wave of steel tanks followed the wave of aeroplanes.

The Germans put up a furious resistance. Every yard of ground around our attacking machines was littered with anti-tank artillery shells. Immediately behind the huge 'K.V.s' for whom the German shells were like so much water off a duck's back, rolled the English

'little brother' tanks, as if behind a wall of armour. Their work was yet to come; our main object was to get as close in to the enemy as possible without being damaged.

A couple of tanks—one a 'K.V.' and the other an 'Englishman,' driven by Kordova—separated from the main body and swerved to the right, in order to attack a big pill-box.

Suddenly, out of the blue, a swarm of German planes appeared. Light bombers dived straight onto the tanks. Their aim was clear—to destroy the largest machines. The bombs exploded dangerously close to the 'K.V.s', spraying them with hot splashes of molten steel and churned-up earth, and all the time the fascists went on making fresh runs-in.

Kordova's tank swung to one side away from his leader. Like a green flash, the top hatch shot open for a moment, a machine-gun was brought into action and spouted a stream of tracer bullets at the enemy planes. The 'Englishman' was covering his 'K.V.' with anti-aircraft fire. The German having failed to drop a single bomb on the 'K.V.' started making repeated runs-in against the tank which was firing at him. There followed a terrific duel between tank and aeroplane. The bomber had already used up his bomb-load and was now firing his cannon against the tank, but the result was no different—all misses.

As soon as he straightened out in the sky for the attack, and started to dive on his target, the tank would make a sudden lurch forward, or swerve to one side. Another miss, and again the fascist would find himself caught by the well-aimed stream of machine-gun fire.

Maddened with rage, the German started his eighth run-in against the tank. By this time Kordova, too, was probably fed-up with lurching from side to side. "Don't move. Fire straight at the swine," he commanded the crew.

The dive-bomber, with engine roaring, swooped low, already anticipating his victory. But half a drum of bullets smacked into the plane's belly, followed immediately by a sharp explosion and a gigantic curtain of vivid flame, which blazed up and covered half the sky. The plane straightened out of its dive for a second and then somersaulted steeply.

Enveloped in flames, it crashed to the ground. The English tank, driven by the Soviet commander, was the victor in this duel—a most effective 'training-demonstration lesson' for the post-graduates attending the refresher course.

With spring coming on, during a lull in the fighting, a group of workers from the district centre made a request to the tankmen:

"The Germans have contaminated our central square, they buried their dead there; now we're digging them up and cleaning the place. But the ground is still frozen hard. The sappers have helped to blow it up, but could you drag the big mounds of earth away with ch-^{ins}?"

"Why not? We're only too pleased at any time to clear our own native soil of such filth," Astakhov answered with a smile, giving orders for the men to help right away.

Straining hard, the powerful 'tugs' wrenched up the tremendous mounds of earth with the fascists frozen into them, and dragged them off into the open country.

Each new day of fighting brings us fresh victories, more miles of Soviet land liberated from the fascist slavery. Our 'white mammoths,' the 'K.V.' tanks, children of the grey Urals, roll triumphantly and sternly onwards. A great weight of steel, smelted in our own country, goes into each of them; but they are not merely so many tons of metal, they are the tremendous weight of our national wrath, streaming westwards to overwhelm the invader.

